FLYPOSTING PLEASE
— fostering oppositional mindset within Central Asia civil society

Daria Cybulska
2023 Churchill Fellow

'Please (~~don't~~) flypost.' Photo by Daria Cybulska

the CHURCHILL fellowship

Acknowledgements
I'm grateful to each of the interviewees who were open to sharing their experiences with me, leaning into trust despite a very challenging environment within which we were connecting. Many of the introductions were facilitated by Nodir Ataev, and Azat Ruziev — thank you. The project was made possible by the flexibility of my employer, Wikimedia UK.

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Executive summary

Introduction
This report, informed by field research in Central Asia in 2024, maps aspects of an enabling environment for a functioning civil society. It uncovers tools, methods, resources, approaches and skills that civil society in Central Asia uses to self-organise, effect change, and, on the most fundamental level, to survive. By learning about the realities of a civil society under pressure, we can learn the fundamentals of what the field needs to thrive in the UK context.

Central Asia is a region of shrinking civil society space, authoritarianism, and limited support from the society at large. But activists are pushing back and finding ways of sustaining their work. As such it is a space where civil society actors adapt their modes of activism and strategies to remain resilient and thriving under pressure. Despite being sombre, the learnings presented in this report can give activists elsewhere guidance on how to build strength within a restricted or deteriorating space.

Purpose of this report
The report invites people supporting civic space in the UK, and the activists themselves, to reflect on critical elements of sustaining activist muscle within society. It also feeds back to international NGOs and funders about what types of support works for organisers operating in restricted spaces.

Key themes
- The importance of terms and what people call themselves; the boundaries of what counts as activism, and what can be safely expressed
- The role of narratives about civil society, both external (e.g. circulated by the governments), and internal (what people believe about themselves and their activism). Critical need and power of alternative, positive narratives
- The role of art in supporting activism and creating a space for it
- The extent of burnout in activism circles and mitigation strategies
- The point of sustaining civil society in a context where very little action remains possible, or takes place in exile
- The role of international NGOs and donors

Recommendations
Key recommendations emerged for the three following areas:

The UK Department for Culture, Media & Sport
1. Hold a broad view and definition of what counts as civil society. When considering the type of activities, include ‘non activist’ initiatives to foster critical mindset and develop civic skills.
2. Support critical thinking programmes, which build the initial funnel to the pipeline of activism. Fostering critical thinking skills is the indispensable step in building a thriving civil society.

3. Support Cabinet Office, and the Civil Society Covenant initiative specifically, in maintaining a broad definition of civil society actors and initiatives.
4. Commit to using positive narratives about the value of civil society, recognising that negative narratives erode public support for civic engagement.

Funders of civil society

1. Set up to provide quick (emergency) and flexible support.
2. Grants could also have built-in flexible funds for future emergencies.
3. Be flexible in vehicles of funding distribution – for example issue service contracts instead of grants.
4. Support flexible delivery models which may have fewer restrictions and be ready to work with groups who have been denied official registration and lack official status.
5. Offer longer term, core funding with a non-burdensome application and reporting process.
6. Fund to prevent or address burnout within civil society – learn from how this is done in more restricted spaces.

Civil society organisations

1. Building a pipeline of activists by developing a critical mindset using programmes that aren't directly activist in nature, such as debate clubs and projects harnessing art.
2. Broaden understanding of what participation and mobilisation can mean.
3. Design intersectional projects to think deeply about inclusion and accessibility of work.
4. Learn from more restrictive contexts, looking to areas such as Central Asia to exploring 'stress tested' models for resilience.
5. Increase impact and reach of your work by using narratives, such as through Art, to counter harmful messaging about civil society.

Overview of themes

There is a pipeline for bringing people into the civil society, and all stages of that pipeline need to be supported to maintain a resilient field.

1. To create a possibility of a person becoming an activist in the future, **an oppositional, critical mindset needs to be fostered**. To become an activist, one has to arrive at a point of seeing things differently to how they are, and wanting to change something. This is the first step in creating activists. How can this be developed, in a context where critical thoughts are not welcome? Who defines the boundaries of people's thoughts? What is the role of art in this?
2. To have a functioning field, there needs to be **accessible, applicable tools and methods** to carry out activism – this includes focus on online safety and legal literacy.
3. **Resilience** is maintained by finding flexible ways of organising, having intersectional programmes, and taking a long-term perspective.

4. To keep the pipeline from eroding, people need to **conserve energy and protect themselves** – there needs to be a focus on anti-burnout practices, supporting 'breathing spaces', and using exile as a mitigation tactic when needed.

Underpinning this is a broad way of thinking about what counts as civil society.

Critical mindset emerged as an indispensable element of a functioning civil society. Without a pipeline of newcomer activists, the civil society will eventually wither away, even if existing activists are resilient. If the environment does not generally support development of a critical attitude, how could it be fostered?

- Developing a critical mindset is a first step to creating an activist, and there are safe ways to foster criticality in restricted contexts.
- Civic participation skills are best developed in an applied setting. An experience of self-expression, within a local matter, develops a civic mindset and practises 'oppositional muscle'.
- Critical mindset is developed when experiencing social issues directly – this can be organised within workshops and art settings.
- Access to a diversity of narratives is key, and meeting a person with a different background can be truly transformational.
- A healthy media ecosystem is key, as is making sure the messaging is accessible.

Resilience is a key aspect of building a civil society that's resistant to shocks and worsening conditions. To continue operating under pressure, civil society needs:

- Intersectionality in its work
- Flexibility in definitions of activism, civil society, and in who counts as target user groups
- Solidarity within the movements, and from international supporters
- To build applicable media literacy skills, and law literacy skills
- A high degree of preparedness for quick changes such as relocation
- To hold a long-term view
- To have access to breathing spaces
- Flexibility in organising models.

Flexibility in organising models is a specific aspect of resilience that warranted a closer look in the research. Groups and organisations have to be creative and flexible in how they are set up and run. Key aspects of this flexibility included:

- Non-traditional, non-hierarchical governance models
- Diversity of solutions for constituting, with tactical choices to remain unregistered, or using fiscal sponsorship models
- Focus on inclusion, working in regions, and across languages
- Using existing social connections for outreach (while this does not remove barriers for their programmes to be accessed by marginalised groups)
- Leaning into art and experiential programmes for raising awareness and activating, which reaches people in a different way than traditional activism
- Keeping broad definitions of what counts as activism, and what counts as a critical activist voice.

Conserving energy and protection – while its efficacy is questionable, exile is an (extreme) mitigating tactic to protect the pipeline of activism. Exiled groups can maintain the fabric of civil society, work on documentation, support solidarity, and carry out communication from a safer position. Maintaining the fabric of civil society is one of the critical roles of the exiled communities. If activists can operate from abroad, it may then take less time to rebuild civil society on the ground, to bring it back and (re)activate the networks when it's safe.

Activist **burnout** is a rife, and surprisingly widely spoken about, issue in the region. One of the most important ways to support activists against burnout is by fostering 'breathing spaces' for rest and recharging. These places, functioning outside of family or business settings, also function as a place to:

- Randomly connect with others, brainstorm and build on the ideas of others
- Safely express one's own identity and have it embraced by others, facilitating critically needed self-acceptance
- Attract new audiences to causes promoted by the 'host' in a welcoming setting
- Express creative ideas, as artists, in an independent setting, and as audiences, explore novel ideas in a freer space.

Safe spaces, if they have a profile (e.g. if they are established art spaces) are monitored, for example for any red lines they may be crossing in their projects. Another challenge is that of resources. Many of the physical spaces I came across exist through unusual arrangements, for example an informal donation of someone's private space. These spaces provide a community for people otherwise shunned, meaning that if resources are needed for its functioning, it's near impossible to secure them locally. International funding and support are often the only options. The critical need for these locations is clear — put simply, the impact of breathing spaces is staying alive.

International NGOs and donors can play a vital role in supporting civil society on a country or regional level. First they need to be aware of power dynamics, work from deep awareness of the region, stay clear of being too inflexible (especially in a rapidly changing context) and be mindful of inadvertently playing into negative narratives about civil society.

- Depending on the need and situation, support needs to be quick and flexible, and also sustained and allowing for intersectional activities.
- There is a need for creativity in how resources are distributed. Practical ways to transfer money can be found. Service contracts (as opposed to grants) can be used.
- Fiscal sponsorship and informal hosting can be a lifeline for unpopular causes.
- Funding for research, network building, and leadership development is needed.
- Tailored training and support make a difference — especially in areas of online safety, tech, legal, and psychological wellbeing and burnout.
- Particular activities that were highlighted for successfully fostering a critical mindset were debate clubs and art activism — these are worth investing in.

Framing and methodology

Civil society in the UK
Civic action in the UK is vibrant in comparison to Central Asia, but it *can* be silenced. Indeed the space has been vulnerable in recent years. In 2023, the UK joined a list of 12 European countries in which civic space was rated as 'narrowed', with contributing factors such as policies and laws, on top of negative public narratives.[1]

In terms of freedom of expression, for example, there have been legislative and policy measures aimed at restricting the ability of civil society organisations to engage in advocacy (e.g. in relation to the 2014 Lobbying Act). At the time of writing this report, there are questions around the implementation of the Online Safety Act, which imposes broad restrictions on content, while not supporting community-driven moderation systems. As seen in other contexts, in the wrong hands such regulations can become tools for government censorship rather than for public protection, while also legitimising such approaches for authoritarian governments elsewhere. The same legislation could be used for suppressing legitimate critical speech.

In the context of assembly and association, the 2022 Public Order Act and 2021 Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act have been an area of concern. These laws "created new offences, increased sentence lengths for non-violent protest and minor acts of sabotage, and gave police new powers to stop protests during them and before they take place."[2]

There are echoes of this situation across Europe. A 2024 report by Amnesty International, "Under Protected and Over Restricted: the state of the right to protest in 21 European countries" speaks about a climate where people's rights to protest are being systematically attacked.[3]

This project asked, **how can civil society maintain its organising power in such a context?**

Civil society in Central Asia
Across the four visited countries in Central Asia, the civic space is severely restricted. Within the latest CIVICUS Monitor[4] civic space is classified as 'repressed' in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, with scores of 40 and 27, respectively (on a scale from 0 to 100 where 0 is the worst). Meanwhile, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan, are rated as 'closed', scoring 18 and 12, respectively. All Central Asian countries now fall into one of the two worst categories in the monitor, meaning that their civic spaces are heavily contested by power holders, who impose legal and practical constraints to their operation. All aspects of civil society operation are affected **— freedom of opinion and expression, media freedom, human rights defenders, safety of journalists, and freedom of assembly and association.**

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[1] For context — https://smk.org.uk/what-we-do/policy-and-research/policy-and-research-protecting-the-space-to-campaign/
[2] https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2024/dec/11/britain-leads-the-world-in-cracking-down-on-climate-activism-study-finds
[3] https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur01/8199/2024/en/
[4] https://monitor.civicus.org/

The situation is deteriorating as regressive laws are being adopted and countries turn toward authoritarianism. The context below is summarised from a briefing paper of the International Partnership for Human Rights[5].

Restrictions on civil society organisations (CSOs); freedom of association: The enactment of a foreign agent-style NGO law in Kyrgyzstan in 2024 raised particular alarm. The so-called 'law on foreign representatives' imposes stigmatising registration requirements and intrusive state oversight on foreign-funded NGOs engaged in 'political' activities — a term so broadly defined that it could encompass core CSO operations (it is argued that the law is in support of transparency). Non-compliance may lead to severe consequences, including the suspension or liquidation of NGOs. The law has created widespread anxiety among CSOs, causing some to self-liquidate and others to restrict their activities to avoid repercussions. It also sets a troubling precedent for other Central Asian countries. At the same time, significant obstacles to CSO operations persist in the region. In Tajikistan, several hundred CSOs have been forcibly closed or pressured to shut down since 2022, leading to a sharp decline in the civil society sector. In Uzbekistan, human rights groups continue to struggle to obtain compulsory state registration.

Freedom of speech, pressure on independent media: The media climate in Kyrgyzstan, once relatively free, has deteriorated due to government raids, arrests of journalists, forced media closure initiatives, and blocking of news sites. In Kazakhstan, independent media and journalists face regular harassment, and a new media law adopted in summer 2024 raises concerns about increased pressure, particularly on foreign outlets. Tajikistan's media crackdown has intensified, as authorities interfere heavily with media operations and currently imprison more journalists than in any other country in the region. In Uzbekistan, despite official rhetoric supporting free speech, independent information platforms, journalists and bloggers are increasingly targeted by retaliatory actions, and draft legislation under consideration risks resulting in new restrictions on media content and operations. Across the region, authorities use concerns about disinformation, extremism and so-called traditional values as pretexts to stifle critical speech and restrict access to information.

Restrictions on the freedom of assembly: The right to peaceful assembly continues to be violated across the region. In Kyrgyzstan, a prolonged court-sanctioned ban on protests remains in place in central Bishkek, while in Kazakhstan, authorities routinely deny permission for peaceful protests and arbitrarily detain and penalise protesters before, during, and after assemblies.

Persecution of critical voices: Civil society activists, human rights defenders, journalists, and bloggers who criticise government policies and speak out against human rights violations face severe persecution. They are subjected to surveillance, threats, and attacks, and are arrested, prosecuted in trials which do not meet international fair trial standards, and imprisoned in retaliation for exercising their freedoms of expression, association, and assembly. Those prosecuted often face charges initiated under broadly worded Criminal Code provisions used to suppress free speech. Others are charged with fabricated offenses

[5] https://iphronline.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/joint-central-asia-civic-space-briefing-for-2024-whdc.pdf

like extortion or fraud. Repression extends beyond borders (translational and online oppression), and intimidation and harassment frequently extend to family members.

While organisations are trying to adapt and function within the challenging environment, this is incredibly hard as the legal ‘red lines’ are constantly changing. This ‘dynamic oppression’ is even harder to navigate than a clear situation, as it leaves activists and groups unsure of how far they can go while still being safe.

Activists are “always anonymous and afraid”. They are also under-resourced. International Non Governmental Organisations (INGOs) are leaving the region, either by being pushed out, or reprioritising (the war in Ukraine shifted priorities for many of the organisations and governments traditionally supporting the region).

Civil society can’t rely on support from the general public either. Its work is generally perceived as disruptive and negative. Negative narratives against activism are amplified by the government and resonate with the cultural background, which includes respect for tradition, prioritising group cohesion and belonging, and orientation towards not challenging others.

Just as the region itself isn’t homogenous, there are many divisions and aspects of severance within the society. Often the activist space functions within the realm of Russian language, with the discourse being completely different in, for example, Uzbek. Most of the materials, and training resources, are only available in Russian too. There are also divisions between regions and major cities, education levels, and even within the activist groups or generations. Bringing the general public on board with the work of the civil society is full of barriers.

This report captures a moment in time within a region whose political context is constantly shifting, being unstable and changeable. Kyrgyzstan is of particular note here. It had long been seen as an ‘island of democracy’ in the region, but has been seemingly undergoing a campaign against civic engagement. The changes introduced in 2024 created an atmosphere of uncertainty, fear, and of being stigmatised within the activist communities. The lack of clarity around how the laws may be implemented were particularly insidious, as it caused the civil society to be cautious and silent, not knowing which actions would be deemed problematic within the new regime. At the time of the research, activists were struggling to orient themselves against this dramatic deterioration, while people previously relatively safe from restrictions (e.g. some bloggers) were finding themselves operating in an unsafe space.

For people elsewhere, it’s a cautionary tale about how a dramatic deterioration in civic space can come as a surprise.

Research approach

50 meetings were conducted, most in person across Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan. Contacts were established via Wikimedia networks, connections with international NGOs working in the region, and individual approaches with activists who were able to connect me further. I interviewed grassroots community organisers, individual campaigners, journalists, art-activists, registered and unregistered

organisations (primarily within media literacy, ecology, feminism, fact checking, media training, Wikimedia), and international NGOs and donors active in the region.

Interview questions were exploratory and open-ended. Interviewees were asked for consent to be cited, with a possibility of being anonymised. Most requested at least a degree of anonymity, and therefore the insights in this report are generally not attributed.

Deep appreciation goes to all the individual activists, organisers, community groups and organisations that were open to sharing their insights with me.

Aims of the research

The initial interview questions aimed to pinpoint tools, approaches, and methods of organising that groups and activists use in restricted contexts — focusing on communication, decision making/governance, partnerships/collaboration, knowledge management and sharing, and outreach.

While my definition of 'civil society' was broad from the start (people taking collective action for good, outside of the State or business), I came across many voices questioning whether there is anything left to engage with for my project — in a sense that there was no functioning civil society in some of the regions studied. As a result, my topic of study, the existence of activism and civil society, itself became an area of exploration. With this, more profound themes emerged in the course of the project:

- The importance of terms and what people call themselves; the boundaries of what counts as activism, and what this means to activists themselves
- The role of narratives about civil society, both external (e.g. circulated by the governments), and internal (what people believe about themselves and their activism). Critical need and power of alternative, positive narratives
- The role of art in supporting activism and creating a space for it
- The extent of burnout in activism circles
- The point of sustaining civil society in a context where very little action remains possible, or takes place in exile
- The role of international NGOs and donors

Two aspects of sustaining a civil society 'pipeline' emerged — oppositional mind, and resilience. These were explored in detail in subsequent interviews, with the following angles of exploration:

- Oppositional mind. To become an activist, one has to arrive at a point of seeing things differently to how they are, and wanting to change something. This is the first step in creating activists. How can this be developed, in a context where critical thoughts are not welcome? Who defines the boundaries of people's thoughts? What is the role of art in all this?

- Resilience. Activism is exhausting, and potentially dangerous. How do people conserve energy and protect themselves? How does safety and trust operate?

Autoethnography and limitations of this research

I took an auto-ethnographic approach to parts of my research, meaning I examined my own experiences and positionality in relation to my project. I attended protest marches and a small public demonstration where participants were filmed by the police.

Noting my experiences in the course of the research, I want to highlight several things.

The positionality I was bringing to the conversations was tangibly affecting what was shared with me. My presence as an international (foreign) person, within the context of the foreign agent -style bills introduced or considered in the countries I visited, was often problematic and uncomfortable. People were understandably guarded, and interviews often had an official, and an unofficial part.

Conversely, I sometimes felt I was being approached in a deferential way, as if I was a representative of an international donor organisation, being talked through metric outputs, theories of change, and success stories. This meant talking through challenges was sometimes less inaccessible.

While not a donor, I did feel the power imbalance in my coming from a resourced, Western context. This was particularly challenging when discussing stories of extreme burnout and working in deeply unsafe contexts. My questions about methods of organising rang hollow when met with the radical hopelessness of some of the activists. This was on top of the uncomfortableness of ‘field research’, where there’s a very real possibility of a sort of repressive collecting, of the participants being reduced to data points, a means to create a theory.

In some cases, however, the ‘interview power’ tables were turned. I found that especially in Kyrgyzstan I was asked a lot of screening and investigative questions before I could get to my research. My interlocutors wanted to understand my context and position, and were keen to have a clear view of the intended audience for the report. I read this assertiveness as an element of their resilience, in fact.

One thing that gave me unexpected hope is understanding that Poland, my country of origin, became one of the safe(ish) havens for activists from Central Asia. A number of organisations continue their work in exile from Poland. This is significant also in the context of my country itself having a deep history of existence within exile. While many of my conversations were questioning the efficacy of the exiled civil society, this somehow gave me a long-term view and some hope.

Limitations
The situation regarding civil society in Central Asia is dynamic, and so are the specific methods discussed. I captured them at a certain point in time.

A lot of the knowledge I was seeking to capture is either tacit or protected, not shareable with a broad audience due to safety concerns. In many cases, if the methods were widely known, they would lose their power.

Protecting positive perceptions (e.g. of an organisation), saving face, and being a good host are important in the region. This coloured some of my meetings.

I spoke to a range of organisers, from individual grassroots activists, to leaders of civil society organisations. While the latter face a challenging operational context, they hold a degree of privilege, resource, and Western support, in comparison to frontline activists (and may have an option of changing jobs, if need be). This was felt by the individual, volunteer activists. In my report I usually combine feedback from individuals and organisations, but I am mindful of the significant difference between them.

Lastly, throughout my research I have questioned whether successful methods of civil society organising in Central Asia are unique to the cultural context of the region, and as such difficult to translate into a Western, UK context. I expand on this in the next section.

Regional context for resilience

Ada Akhmedova - Eternal[6]

The poster portrays seven grandmothers standing together, holding each other and engaged in conversation. Each wears a white elechek, a traditional Kyrgyz headdress made from a long piece of fabric wrapped around the head. In Kyrgyz culture, the elechek carries deep symbolic meaning: after a woman's death, the fabric was used as a burial shroud, while the remaining material was passed on to relatives as a blessing for long life.

The choice to depict grandmothers arises from a silence: the absence of stories and memories about female ancestors. In our culture, seven generations of grandfathers are remembered, but women are rarely given the same space. This work is my way of creating that space—for my grandmothers and all the women before me—thanks to whom I am here.

Even in a world that feels sealed beneath a heavy metal lid, what we do is never only for ourselves. It is for our present, in honor of our past, and for the future we dare to imagine. I often ask myself: what would my grandmothers have done if they were here, facing this difficult situation? As a woman, I feel I must live life to the fullest—to follow my heart and do what I truly desire. I owe this honesty to all the ancestors who came before me, and I know they are happy to see me live, grow, and flourish.

[6] The images used in this report were produced as a part of the A0 of Freedom project, the context for which is described in the 'conclusion' section.

Resilience of civil society relates to an ability to sustain shocks, restrictions, and to continue operating under pressure. It's an ability to push back, to persist, to exist. It's a fundamental characteristic of a civil society which can continue to operate.

This research asked, how much of the resilience of civil society in Central Asia comes from the context in which it operates, which is qualitatively different from the UK? These are simplifications and generalisations, but in general, societies in Central Asia are oriented towards flexible, tactical community organising and, in general, activism.

The longstanding history of community suppression means there is lived experience of 'working with lies' — a built-in degree of resilience to propaganda and misinformation. People highlighted a 'been there done that' of post-Soviet experience, giving communities both knowledge of how to survive suppression, and how to hold a longer-term view which can give a sense of grounding during a difficult time.

One of the strongest characteristics of the communities and individuals in the region is flexibility of approach and tactics. People self-organise and mobilise quickly, with information within networks spreading fast, for example via groups on social media — this was very visible during landslides in Osh (Kyrgyzstan) in 2024, for instance. There are structures of connections woven through groups, meaning that people operate within nets of support and communication, knowing that there are informal channels where help can be requested. Social circles are much intertwined, so if people from within the network are harmed, there is a mobilisation factor. Conversely, though, an outsider can have difficulty in entering a group, and it can be hard to achieve anything without connections. Movement-building can be hard as groups may not be open to un-wetted outsiders.

People possess a certain ease in working with difficulties. This nimbleness means that people are readily open to picking up work-arounds if original plans or an infrastructure fails. Achieving a lot with very little is underpinned by creativity and resourcefulness. The approach of cunning problem solving is common, and valued. Using one's own common sense — for example making one's own decisions despite public warning signs not to do something — is normal.

This 'taking things into your own hands' approach is very prominent across civil society. It's common for young people to set up their own NGOs around issues they want to address. Leadership programmes (e.g. the now discontinued Soros NGO leadership development programme) give rise to organisers who then create their organisations.

There is an unfortunate aspect of this approach, in that people believe their misfortunes are their own fault only. For example, it's common for people to think that their rights being broken is a result of them doing something incorrectly. NGOs in the region complained that it can be hard to get people rallied around human rights partly for this reason.

There is an unfortunate aspect of this approach which means that people believe their misfortunes are their own fault only. For example, it's common for people to think that their rights being broken is a result of them doing something incorrectly. NGOs in the region complained that it can be hard to get people rallied around human rights partly for this reason.

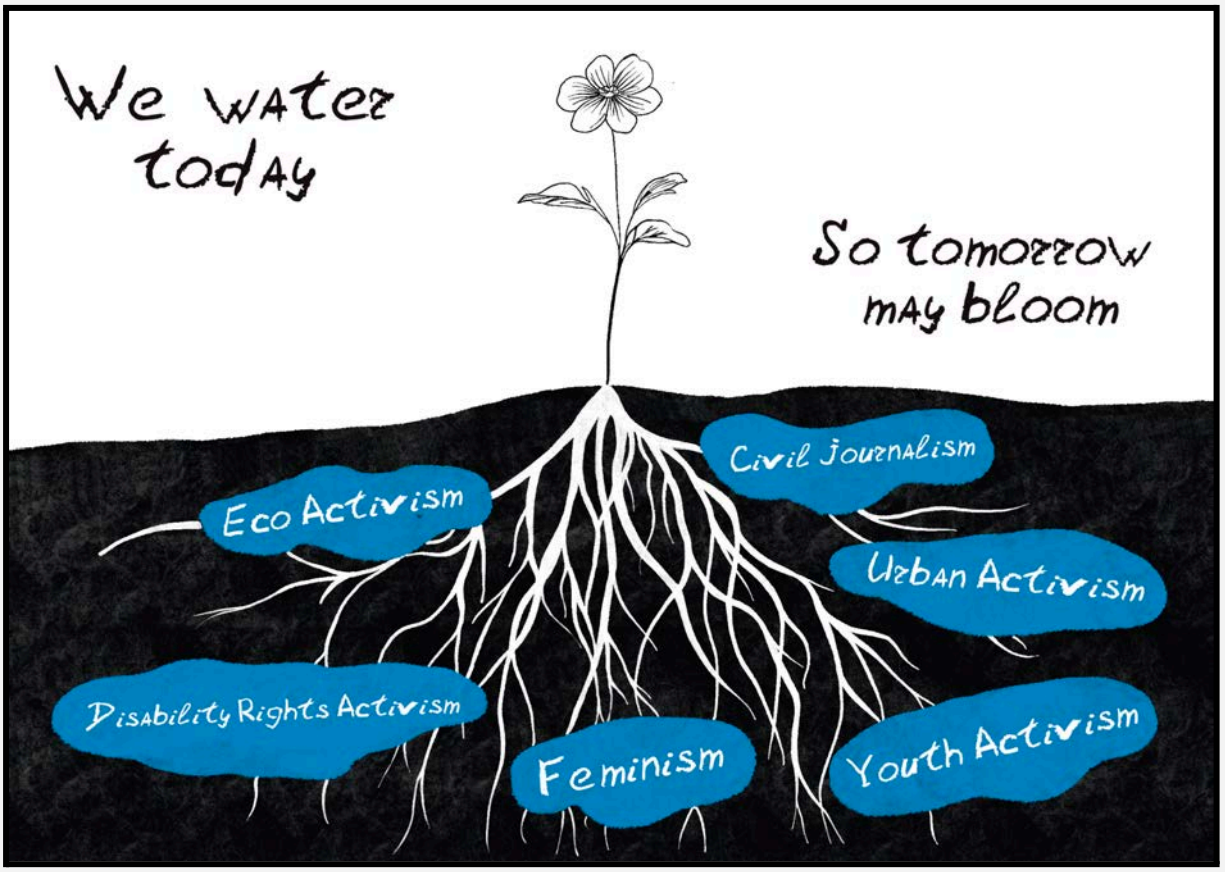
In Kyrgyzstan there was an approach of suspicion towards authority and hierarchy, and people tended to be more comfortable in voicing criticism (on the whole, something much less present in other countries in the region). At the same time though, the legacy of the Soviet systems does mean that people's thinking can be rigid, with societies used to 'being done to', rather than taking an active role in pushing back against something. This is coupled with a persistent belief within the population that people are here for the government, and are beholden to it, rather than the other way round.

Lastly there is a certain paradox in the generally low level of interpersonal trust towards strangers. While this makes movement-building harder, it also makes not accepting things easier. As told by one organiser, if he sees a stranger, for example, cutting down a tree, he will not immediately assume that someone has permission for it. He may step in and question that action — something he doesn't believe people would do so readily in the West. 'Assuming bad faith' can be an aspect of an activist, critical mindset.

Resilience of civil society is contextual, rooted in (or indeed fostered in opposition to) the culture and values of the local communities. Growing resilience of the UK civil societies would therefore need to be informed by what local communities lean into in times of pressure — rather than copying models from elsewhere.

> "*We do it cunningly."*

Resilience



Ekaterina Sanamiants - Roots. “We water today so tomorrow may bloom.”

Strong, dense roots growing underground and getting the water (nourishment) in the various types of social activism. Above the surface – a fragile sprout with a blooming flower.

The flower demonstrates a blossoming day of tomorrow which would not be possible without the tireless efforts of various activists.

Going deeper, the poster is about unseen labor – the tireless, often invisible work that activists do every day. The flower represents hope, growth, and the future we’re striving for — one that cannot exist without the deep and sometimes painful groundwork being laid right now. It's a visual metaphor for patience, persistence, and collective care across movements.

What are the tactics of the civil society groups in Central Asia which uniquely contribute to their resilience against a challenging, changing environment?

Intersectionality
The majority of civic groups I met don't hold a single-issue specialism; instead, they work across a spectrum of topics and social groups. The approach is intergenerational, cross-regional, and cross-movement, taking into consideration various ethnicities, languages, education level, and socio-economic status. Groups located in capitals think mindfully about the urban/rural divide and how that shows up in power differentials.

Working across issues can stem from a deep understanding of how various aspects of marginalisation influence each other to deepen oppression. For example, one organisation made a journey from being a feminist, to an intersectional-feminism group with consideration for gender. There is also a growing digital rights community space, where issues are considered holistically, for example, looking at how digital rights of LGBTQ+ communities can be supported in Central Asia.

At least in some cases, this approach stems from necessity – with a challenging funding landscape, groups have to broaden their remit to ensure grants and project income. This creates a portfolio programme, with quite distinct projects being delivered by one organisation – for example combining migrant rights, domestic violence, and ecology.

A broad portfolio means an organisation is diversified in terms of its programmes, and delivery can be rephrased or re-routed if certain themes or projects become red-lined by the government.

Flexibility
General flexibility is another aspect of resilience – flexibility in what counts as activism [see 'Boundaries of activism'], or who the audience/target users of a project are. A trend I captured while talking with media and journalism organisations was a broadening of who they consider as a 'journalist'. As the media landscape becomes more restricted and regulated, they look to skill up informal journalists – like bloggers – in spaces that are still a little less restricted. This is so that they can still operate their training and development programmes, and build an informal tissue of journalism within the information ecosystem.

Solidarity
On an interpersonal level, groups spoke passionately about solidarity they feel within their communities and organiser groups. Typically, for activists working within marginalised issues, these groups are the only spaces where they can freely express and work on topics important to them. It's not uncommon that this is where they meet like-minded people for the first time. Links built in this way are powerful and form a necessary ingredient of strong activist networks. In this way any community building-activities, such as youth groups, are a valuable tool for building a resilient civil society.

During protests in Georgia against the Foreign Agent Bill, Central Asia's civil society felt that Georgia's protesters were standing behind them. Seeing this support and fight was incredibly powerful, if ultimately unsuccessful.

Some organisers expressed the futility of statements issued by INGOs and other external communities criticising the oppressive situation in Central Asia. At the same time, many activists do look to international movements for inspiration and ideological support. In the context of constant criticism and oppression they experience, this solidarity support is not trivial.

Skills development for increased resilience
Building practical skills – if they are tailored and applicable in the given context – can make a difference in how well civil society continues to operate. Programmes around developing self-knowledge for youth and their communities are of particular note – Youth of Osh[7] runs such activities.

Media literacy skills development is similarly vital, across a variety of provisions and audiences, and levels of formality. NGOs described long-term programmes such as 'Media Literacy Houses', 'NGO Media School' or investigative journalist training programmes. These programmes create networked alumni cohorts which can be activated if the country goes into a political crisis.

Connected to media literacy are skills relating to dealing with hate speech and harassment online – instructions on how to protect oneself in relation to activism activity. I noted Article 19 tools[8] being used in training here – they were valued for clarity and accessibility in Russian.

Legal literacy skills are important in order to be able to orient yourself within a hostile environment of complex, changing, and unclear NGO-related laws. One organisation highlighted that there are 30 laws in Uzbekistan relating to the media, which makes it hard to orient oneself in the landscape. Because of this setting, many media development or civil society network organisations offer legal services to activists and groups. These include legal awareness training, offering contacts to lawyers, and preparing analysis of laws. Organisations expressed concern that many activists lack any legal knowledge, and so are vulnerable when, for example, stopped by the police. Legal literacy is a way of protecting against that.

General legal literacy was also highlighted as a necessary ingredient for building civic engagement. It's critical to make people aware of the rights they have, but also to outline specifically what the rights mean in practice and how to exercise them. Giving people awareness of how things should work is an important first step in supporting activism. It was recognised that talking about human rights in abstract is not engaging, and so showing how these are useful in practice is necessary.

Preparedness
Being ready for a crackdown is practically a standard element of operating a civil society organisation in Central Asia. A strategy can include changing how the organisation's goals and programmes are articulated (e.g. 'peacebuilding' instead of 'human rights and advocacy'), relocation plans, or creating mirror media sites in the case of journalism activity.

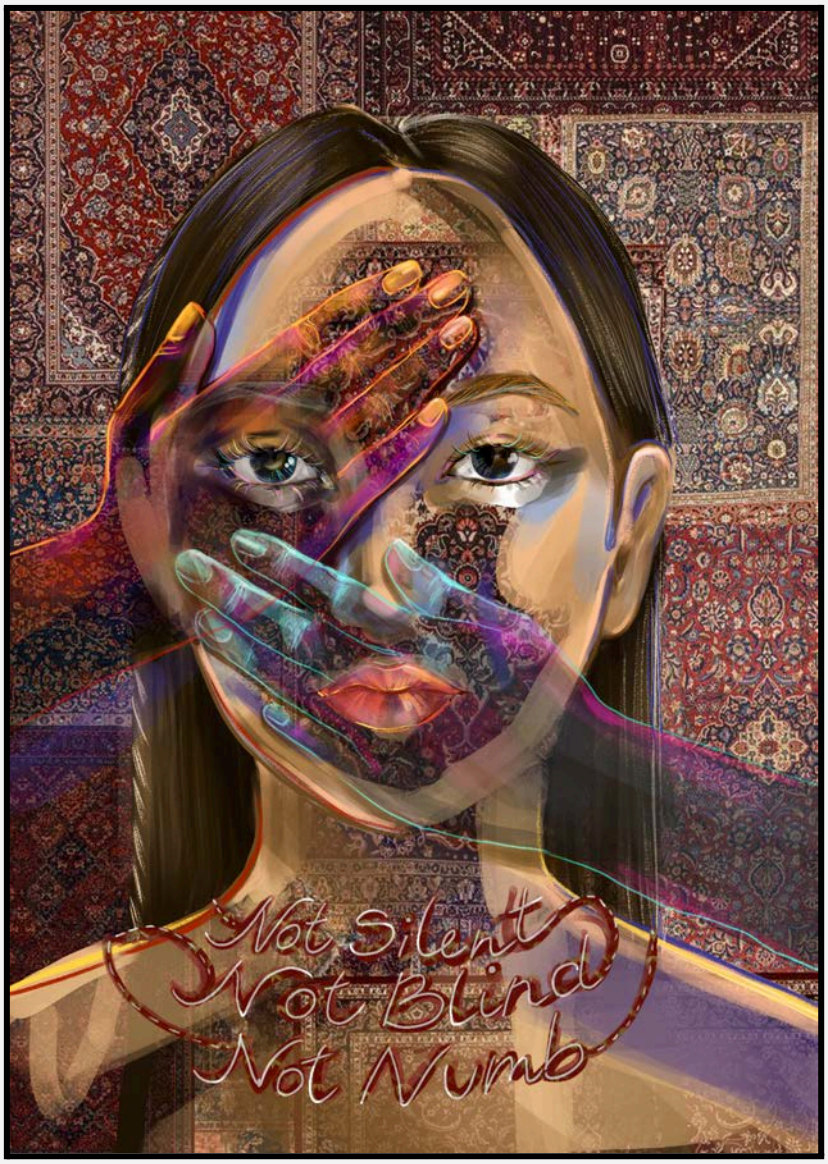
[7] https://www.peaceinsight.org/en/organisations/youth-of-osh/?location=kyrgyzstan&theme
[8] For example https://www.article19.org/resources/hate-speech-explained-a-summary/

Long-term view
Most activists I came across were struggling with burnout or had faced it previously [See more in ‘Radical burnout’]. Psychological support can provide respite and hopefully prevent irreparable damage. In the context of a worsening civil society situation, activists spoke of taking a long-term view, where the changes they are fighting for may not transpire for decades or even generations (‘*Even forever can eventually come to an end*’). This gives people strength to continue resistance and gives meaning to maintaining the connective tissue of activism while waiting for a more open climate.

In essence, resilience is maintained by finding flexible ways of organising, having intersectional programmes, and taking a long-term perspective. All of these aspects can be taken as guiding principles when supporting UK civil societies – not forcing groups into short-term, single-issue programmes means they are more robust for future shocks.

> *“I had belief in my heart, but it disappeared. And I saw it again in people’s eyes here. Now I have it again.”*

Oppositional mindset



Azalia Ibraimova - Not silent, not blind, not numb

This is a story about those who cannot be silenced. Hands reach to their faces, trying to block their gaze, to cut off their breath, to steal their voice. But their eyes still stare straight ahead, and the voice grows even louder. This is an image of pressure—of power, of fear, of attempts to silence the truth. But behind every shadow there is light. And no darkness can completely obscure it.

The carpet behind me represents memory and cultural heritage. It symbolizes that roots are stronger than any taboo. Like people who remember, who know, and who do not remain silent.

This is about the right to see and speak. About the right to be alive and heard. About unbreakability. About how a voice cannot be silenced if it is born from the truth.

Any activist or player within civil society holds to some degree a ‘critical mindset’ – a keen awareness of a dissonance between how things are, and how they could/should be. This may sound simplistic, but without a pipeline of newcomer activists, the civil society will eventually wither away. If the environment does not generally support development of a critical attitude, how could it be fostered? My investigation highlighted several key tactics.

Developing criticality

As expressed by a media literacy educator, one of the most difficult things for a person to do is to change their mind. It’s a challenging process moderated by the conservative environment in the region. How then can an activist be created?

Developing criticality can start without jumping into action (i.e. being an active campaigner etc) – it can be taught first without being political and value-loaded. Elements of logical thinking and taking perspective can be introduced to facilitate people’s habits of questioning and exploration. That serves as a solid background to bringing in civic activism topics.

The problem is, you can hold a critical-thinking skillset and still not be able to apply it to activism. Central Asia societies hold attitudes of self-reliance and self-organisation, but still, in general, don’t transfer it to political activity. While critical thinking as a skill can be developed agnostically of a subject area, it then requires an educator to facilitate a transfer of these skills to changemaking. Chemistry is not democracy, but mental strategies of thinking critically can be used in activism *if* the process is supported.[9]

Specific video games can be constructed as a tool for this. Another incredibly important model is **youth debate clubs**. This type of programme was popularised in the region by Western donor organisations (for example Open Society Foundation), and as such I was sceptical of it being a model pushed onto a region. However, the debate club model appears well adopted in the region, and there is local institutional knowledge now of how to run such a programme (even as funding or support dwindles). Being part of an internationally recognised model is seen as desirable too. Even in the most restricted civic spaces in Tajikistan the debate club model is delivered. It can offer, as described by one of the coordinators, “7:15 minutes of freedom”. This metaphorical space gives an opportunity to develop critical thinking, in a way that’s not generally fostered in formal education in the region.

Participants acquire experience in examining their thought processes, analysing their opinions, and become better at arguing for their position. A programme coordinator described that at first participants can be extremely stressed by being in a debate environment. They tend not to ask for clarifications if they don’t understand the debate topic. Becoming comfortable with showing lack of knowledge is part of the development process.

Debate club has the structure of a competition where, as you move up the ranks, there is also an opportunity to exchange thoughts with students from other regions or countries, and students are motivated to participate in any programmes that would give them access to better education and opportunities.

[9]Based on the debate within https://www.jstor.org/stable/1176382

Further, culturally it's common in the region to only give negative feedback – it's a part of the hierarchical structure. However, at ОГС[10] in Tajikistan, course leaders give positive feedback. This unusual approach is actually designed to also covertly foster equity and reduce habits of being deferential in the students.

Art spaces can also be used as environments for fostering a social debate. Theatre 705[11] in Kyrgyzstan runs the model of a discussion after their shows, which touch on a broad range of socially informed topics. The audience self-moderates a discussion, often working through deep disagreements. Audience members get experience of examining their thought processes, analysing their opinions, and become better at arguing for their position — something they may not have a chance to do elsewhere.

Applied civic participation – changing minds by doing

Despite the above, to create an activist, action can be better than thought, and doing something is better than debating about it. An act of agitation (regardless of its nature), as an expression of dissatisfaction, can be the formative experience to create agents of change.

People I spoke with at a small demonstration in Kyrgyzstan described a novel experience of having their voice heard. For people that are marginalised within the society, this can be truly activating, and can put them on a path of changemaking.

Many civic space organisations describe running programmes which, while staying clear of any topical red lines, give opportunities for practising these self-expression activist-type skills. In another example, encouraging local activity campaigning was seen as a way to build activist muscle even if it concerned very benign topics. Some of these opportunities are even supported by the government. In Kyrgyzstan there is a public discussion platform,[12] initiated by the government in 2020, to discuss draft laws. People can provide suggestions on the platform – and Ukuk Bulagy Project (now closed) gave people instructions on how to write a good suggestion. Civic Participation Fund[13] is one of the strongest and most experienced civil society organisations promoting civic initiatives in Kyrgyzstan.

Ukuk Bulagy Project taught 300 people to write letters to the city mayor about a local issue. That experience may come in useful at a later point, in a different context. Another organisation describes facilitating a participatory budgeting process at a municipal level, with citizens having a say on spending relating to city improvements and public spaces. This builds a sense of being part of the city, but more importantly builds experience of participating in a governmental process.

Within such programmes, some organisations genuinely operate in collaboration with the government, facilitating acceptable social dialogue. Others see such programmes as a covert way to build social oppositional muscle.

Emotive, experiential participation – changing minds by showing

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[10] http://freedom.tj.tilda.ws/

[11] https://artfocusnow.com/discoveries/underground-haven-theater-705-reshapes-kyrgyz-performance-art/

[12] https://koomtalkuu.gov.kg

[13] https://platforma.kg/en/

Many activists described their own starting point as triggered by witnessing acts of injustice, often relating to something personal. Witnessing injustice or wrongdoing has a very powerful effect.

The activist, urban environmentalist and labour rights activist Bermet Borubaeva has been organising a number of initiatives around ecology in Bishkek. She co-founded the Bishkek School of Contemporary Arts, which, together with Tazar Association (a recycling platform with an eco-education programme), has been supporting the 'Trash Festival'. It's an initiative which brings artists together with experts, activists, and citizens to bring attention and awareness to environmental pollution (for example in the Ala-Archa region). The rich programming of the Trash Festival,[14] which has taken place several times now, includes workshops, contemporary art works, archival research, statistics, personal accounts, interactive installations from recycled materials, and performances. The festival took place at a landfill site, which aimed to give audiences a first-hand experience of the issues being campaigned for. There was, for example, a 'Trash River' walk where a group would start a walk within a beautiful mountain setting, follow a river and end at a horrible landfill. It was to show people first-hand the connections between nature, pollution, and the city. This project involved a public day trip to Altyn-Kazyk, an environmental disaster zone on the outskirts of Bishkek. The language of the project was welcoming and inclusive. A group of 10-20 people consisting of journalists, general public, and people connected to the government attended the tour and experienced the 'trash mountain' for themselves, with freedom to make their own conclusions.

There was also a 'Library of Thrown Books' initiative, to build a library for the children of Altyn-Kazyk, local to the landfill. Local children experience a lot of inequalities and often work at the landfill instead of going to school. There was programming including education classes delivered by volunteering, environmental lessons, production of an art book, presentation of research on textile waste in Kyrgyzstan, a performance of the fairy tale "Sparkling Mountain" about how schoolchildren from Altyn-Kazyk fight the garbage monster, and the opening of a public space. Artistic initiatives were mixed with awareness-raising talks. What seems to be most impactful, in the opinion of Bermet Borubaeva, is allowing people to see the landfill issue with their own eyes, while later offering art-led programming to contextualise the issue and inspire action.

Exposure to 'difference' – changing minds by comparison

For many of us, being exposed to people who think differently and have a different background is normal and common. Not so in Central Asia, where such opportunities are limited and the culture values social cohesion over difference. Many interviewees stressed the critical value of their exposure to diversity of viewpoints, access to *comparison* of how things could be different*,* as a source of their critical mindset. Granted, this was often connected to a degree of social privilege – for example, available finances to study or travel abroad, knowing Russian (which gives access to a broader range of material), and having parents who worked or studied abroad and were often more socially progressive.

[14] For example in 2023 – http://tazar.org/en/blog/programma-festivalya-osmyslyaya-istoriyu-zagryazne/

Access to a variety of narratives was stressed as a lifeline in a context where generally only one viewpoint is allowed. This was especially important amongst local Wikimedians (volunteers who edit Wikipedia pages, across a variety of languages) – who describe how important it is that on Wikipedia people with different ideas can share viewpoints and interpretations of the world.

It's easier to have access to different viewpoints if one speaks an international language such as Russian or English. Kyrgyz feminist groups were stressing how international feminist groups are an inspiration to them – but they can only have access to their ideas through English. There are more materials about (Soviet) decolonisation, which is gaining traction across Central Asia, in Russian, although the topic is also popular with language activists. Artists are often drawn to working with local languages, and art accessible in Kazakh or Kyrgyz has a huge impact in these languages being embraced and alive. OzgeEpic in Kazakhstan, for example, is an art hub that does all of its activities and programming in Kazakh – the art space, theatre, gallery, museum, studio, bookshop, concert hall, and workshops. They have branches in 4 cities: Almaty, Astana, Turkistan and Oral. OzgeEpic is a world play with Kazak word Өзгepic (change, Өзге means 'different') and English 'epic' – together the hub's name is 'different epic, an epic that creates change'.

The issue of language was coming up frequently, with trainers and leaders bemoaning lack of quality resources and expertise in local languages. At the same time, many recognised that there's been a generations-long narrative of the local languages being useless. With that, Wikimedians felt that creating articles in local languages is particularly important for opening the minds of people in the region who don't have access to other languages (and who on the whole tend to be more conservative).[15]

It was noted that to truly foster different thinking, however, participating in an online space is not enough – only having an in-person experience of meeting someone with very different views can be truly transformational.

Media and information ecosystem

Developing media literacy practises many of the elements required to foster a critical mindset. One activist described her deep experience of analytical and persuasive writing, working with data, and a general approach of an investigative journalist as critical in understanding and communicating social issues she was working on.

Media literacy doesn't have to be highly technical. Internews in Kyrgyzstan, an information NGO, develops the media literacy of poets so that they can act as amplifiers of these skills in communities. Traditional poets and storytellers are highly valued in the communities and their reach is significant.[16] In designing the poet training programme, Internews found that media literacy terminology was not accessible to the trainees, so the organisation used other language and examples from the famous Kyrgyz epic Manas while teaching the same skills.

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[15] A small note – generally, most of the resources and opportunities for 'exposure' to difference are located in the capitals. However, sometimes it's good to be located far from the centre of power, with the margins providing a different setting for divergent thinking.

[16] https://ijnet.org/en/story/kyrgyzstan-journalists-are-teaming-akyns-amplify-impact

The possibility of changing minds

When asked about how to take the general public through a similar journey, activists were very sceptical, and rather negative about the mindset of societies they live in. They spoke of people being hierarchical and deferential in their thinking, expecting a leader to tell them what to do. Many spoke with resignation about narrow-mindedness and general resistance to change.

Certainly, there are other pressing concerns in people's lives that come before civic engagement – security, socio-economic issues, family. It's not immediately obvious to people how activism could shift the systemic underpinning of their issues.

Conformity of thought is also seen as a barrier. Disagreement and disharmony are not socially welcome, and initiative can be suppressed or even punished. Perceptions matter a lot, especially with the communities being closely connected, and so being oppositional risks social ostracism. This leaves little space in the social realm for critical thought – one young woman in a youth club spoke of attempting to spread a pro-women message on social media, but she was found out and there were consequences. She complained to me that it wasn't even a feminist message, so the repercussions felt out of proportion.

Many activists spoke of the impossibility of trying to change people's minds. The only thing possible was *showing* people the alternatives, and leaving them to go through their own change. The issue with that is, because the activist spaces are protected and hidden, as an 'outsider' it's not easy to be exposed to them. You are either on the inside, trusted to have access to the right content and people, or on the outside, not knowing what you don't know. One young woman in Osh spoke to me about the transformational impact that her chancing upon the concept of feminism on the Internet (in Russian) had on her worldview when she was eleven. None of her friends were supportive of the views she then shared with them, aged 13 – they found it 'freaky'. She is now dreaming of studying abroad. Similarly, members of activist groups spoke of initially coming across information about activities randomly on their Instagram feeds.

As the online spaces become more controlled, and information about activism stops being broadcasted, we lose opportunities for fostering an oppositional mindset amongst people who are not connected to the right circles. You are either inside them and have access to the right information, which is kept protected and closed, or outside with little chance to come across them. Activists themselves didn't have a good answer to this conflict between needing to be safe and secret, and knowledge sharing and outreach.

This need for protection is closely linked to the red lines of activism, discussed in the next section.

In the UK there are significantly more opportunities for developing critical mindset, both in education and across public debate. This needs to be maintained and protected – especially with the view of maintaining a healthy and diverse media ecosystem.

> *"Without oppositional mind no democracy can exist"*

Amir Kholmatov - Gender - Body. Series "The Power Within"

These visual stories are about people who don't shout—they germinate.

Every body is a soil. When a person accepts themselves, they become a space in which others can grow. There is no right or wrong here—there is life in many forms. And the value is not in the form, but in what you put into it.

Within restrictive environments, definitions and boundaries of terms become particularly critical – what counts as community organising, or activism? What do you call yourself? What's safe to use? Flexibility of interpretation, bending terms to new contexts, becomes important. In a space where public action can't happen, different models of resistance develop, and require new language.

As long as I was flexible with my approach, I was able to see models of resistance and activism in Central Asia, despite there being a narrative that there is no civil society left in the region. NGOs and organisers were similarly flexible, either to intentionally steer clear of any governmental red lines, or to disguise their activist projects as something safer. One activist spoke of getting support from a lawyer in an ecology campaign he was running – "not a human rights lawyer, just a practical person" as he framed it. A human rights label would tag the project as too activist.

During my research, the organisations in Kyrgyzstan were just starting to adapt to the new reality of a much more restricted space, and were re-evaluating how to communicate their work. They spoke of flexibility in communicating their goals and activities, not talking about it as 'brightly, sharply' as before. There was a possible split of activity streams, with some becoming less talked about than others. One organisation in Uzbekistan said that 'advocacy doesn't have to be loud', in the context of their communications and sensitivity training for organisers. An organisation in Tajikistan was at pains to stress that they teach neutrality and balance in their journalist training, feeling that activism can be too partial.

What emerged was a landscape of tactical re-phrasing of unsafe work or self-imposed delivery changes based on unspoken restrictions (many red lines are not explicitly named).

Self-identification

The language of activism is a fraught terrain. What do people who, in my eyes, are activists call themselves? On the one hand embracing an activist identity can be empowering. In many contexts, however, people baulked at the suggestion of being activists – this would be too dangerous. In Tajikistan, 'activism' has an aggressive undertone to it, and people would prefer not to use it. Some activists would choose to be called 'volunteers', even if this label was sometimes found to be somewhat disempowering and subservient, signifying a lack of decision-making power in the organisation or project. Others would lean into 'social activity', since activism is seen as being an anti-government term. 'Community organising' can also be dangerous to use – mobilising people is unwelcome.

Because of the restrictive environment, there is often a gap between what a person sees themselves as, and what they would openly say they are. This means activists are less externally visible, making it harder for others to be exposed to their 'oppositional mindset'.

Identifying audiences and beneficiaries

I found many media and information literacy NGOs, particularly in Kyrgyzstan, expanding the set of their audiences as a result of media restrictions. As the media landscape became increasingly restricted, in recent years they broadened the audiences of their programmes.

This tactic builds skills and connections within groups who were not as strongly controlled at that point. Organisations were reassessing who counts as a journalist or a critical voice –

these now commonly include bloggers, content creators, influencers, social entrepreneurs, grassroots organisers, ‘media-active youth’, and traditional storytellers. The content produced by these people isn’t necessarily loudly activist in nature – one example was of a blogger writing about art and local heritage, getting young people interested in their local culture. The point was to preserve a general media space with people committed to a good information ecosystem.

One organisation described a goal of building a blogger community as an industry, running events and discussions – with the goal to make them feel as a sector, and feel more accountable for the messaging they were spreading.

Topical red lines

In exploring what topics and activities were deemed safe or allowable, there were some common red lines. Anything relating to political opposition, national politics, or regional conflicts was entirely unsafe. LGBTQ+ topics were not possible. Decolonisation, especially when linked to language activism, was fraught. Projects focusing on developing the skills of documenting violations of human rights were risky, although less so if they steered clear of direct activism.

Subjects that were commonly seen as ‘safe’ were generally these, which can be seen as apolitical:

- Ecology and protection of the environment, where the messaging is constructive and positive. In Uzbekistan, ecology work within a ‘citizen activist handbook’ included greening local common spaces, and access to water. Neighbourhood activities were encouraged, if they weren’t framed in language that was too activist. In Tajikistan this was framed as not radical and focused on informing the society and taking small actions such as recycling. (But this is shifting and is particularly visible in Kyrgyzstan, where even air pollution can be seen as a political question.)
- Projects around national values, maintaining traditions, and ‘superficial topics’ such as cuisine. These were seen as very safe, and often connected with government grants for civil society to deliver them.
- Social inclusion projects, depending on the social group in question. Many NGOs run programmes around migration or prisons.
- Rights of women and children. Some social awareness campaigns, for example around autism, were seen as less sensitive.
- Socially oriented apolitical service provision (often supported because they take away social welfare burden). In general**,** direct delivery of social support initiatives is safer than advocacy and systems change. People working on such projects were cautious not to get associated with more outspoken community leaders. Again narrative was important – work was framed as social activity and not activism (which would mean being anti-government).
- Social health, healthy lifestyle, sports.
- Youth engagement.
- Animal protection.

In this context, Wikimedia editors and organisers are able to enjoy flexibility in what topics they engage with, as the model of contribution is very open and flexible (for example, it can

include both articles about national dishes, and female representation[17]). However, even editing activity isn't safe in some contexts.

There is much more space to engage with difficult topics in the context of the **arts.** Theatre 705, for example, has programming that includes topics of discrimination, violence, human rights and freedoms, and is able to operate. These models are described in more detail in the Breathing spaces section.

Systems change work is tricky in most contexts as it can be by nature critical of the existing, government-run systems. It is possible, however, to influence underpinning **cultural norms** and beliefs through narrative work. Within the Ukuk Bulagy Project we spoke of trying to shift social norms and stereotypes around the most pressing issues in society (known through their research) – such as domestic violence and the pervasive cultural trope of not speaking out about it ("Don't multiply the pain"). More on this in the Narratives sections.

In the UK, in the context of policy, civil society can be thought of somewhat narrowly – in the context of place-based, continuously active community groups. Being flexible with what counts as activism and civil society allows for widening the field, and as a result reaching more people with programmes that may be fostering civic spirit within the society.

"The context of Central Asia is incompatible with civil society activism."

[17] https://diff.wikimedia.org/2022/04/21/wikipedia-in-kyrgyz-language-has-been-enriched-with-the-names-of-100-women%EF%BF%BC/

Adel Ismailkhanova - Roots.

My posters are my personal embrace of activism. They are about how I've dealt with and continue to deal with frustration in activism. My existential journey and awareness of myself as part of a larger ecosystem, part of an activist community. The poster depicts a sunflower shaped like the sun and the ubiquitous underground inhabitants—mycelium. The work also features mountains, which for me always symbolize freedom, the elements, and grandeur. I assembled some of the mountains from tush-kiyiz, traditional Central Asian rugs, which for me signifies an understanding of my roots and decoloniality.

This section highlights the methods of organising, governance models, and ways of running programmes in restricted contexts. While many groups preferred not to be highlighted, several are mentioned by name.

It's common that the activist organisations have non-traditional, non-hierarchical **governance models**. How the groups make decisions and run their initiatives is reflective of the empowerment and inclusion they stand for in their work. There are inclusive, consensus-based meetings, with value-led ground rules for discussions. At Salaam Cinema,[18] for example, the participation rules include: no hate speech, LGBTQI+-friendly approach, humanity, solidarity, and overall support for Salaam's ideology.

There is a diversity of solutions for **constituting** organisations too, with some in flux as groups seek alternative models within the shifting legal framework. It can take years to receive permission to register, and to receive local funds. Some groups remain unregistered – it can be unsafe or not possible to be official. In this context, funders' requirements for certain official documentation are impossible to meet (some groups report a difficulty in explaining this to the funders). A fiscal sponsorship model, while not widely known in the region, can be a viable solution for some small unregistered groups and initiatives (although still putting the host at risk). There is also a network of collaborations with external organisations where the collaborations happen without any formal documents signed.

Similarly, there is flexibility in **income models**, especially because of the increasing difficulty in getting foreign grants. For those organisations that had the ability to adapt, they were shifting to a mixed financial model, with some service contracts, and elements of earned income – for example, by starting to sell spaces on their summer youth camps. Social entrepreneurship enabled some groups to co-fund their work while still working to their aims.

Beyond strategic delivery decisions about what activities are safe to run (see Boundaries of activism), organisations put a lot of thought into **accessibility and inclusion**, with significant consideration for intersectionality. Many groups make sure their in-person programming goes beyond the capitals (Central Asian Museum of Feminist and Queer Art[19] organises exhibitions in remote areas, making them relevant to local heritage). IDEA network[20] spoke about working with minorities in a way that's very mindful of positionality and how the programme leaders would be received in terms of their own identity.

Also for inclusion, many organisations were aiming to work bilingually, in Russian and in the local language. This, while time consuming and challenging, was seen as very important in social change work. Organisers in Kazakhstan, for example, felt that most of the civil society is active in Russian only, meaning that their work doesn't reach other parts of the society, increasing polarisation. One organisation was keen to ensure that their content in Kazakh is original, rather than being translations from Russian.

[18] https://www.teh.net/our-members/salaam-cinema/
[19] https://www.instagram.com/femmuseum/
[20] https://ideaca.today/en

The methods for **recruitment and attracting participation** differed, depending primarily on how ‘acceptable’ the group’s activities were. In Tajikistan, ОГС is well known due to their participation in youth events. Similarly the Youth of Osh in Kyrgyzstan has a degree of recognition, because they coordinate volunteer participation in external events such as half-marathons. This allows them to promote their own work to the event's audiences.

People find organisations that support marginalised people through social media – often the algorithm on Instagram highlights to them events relevant to their area of interest and that’s how they eventually find support.

Ultimately, most connections are made through word of mouth – which is flexible and adaptable, but may not necessarily work for someone who is isolated and marginalised (for example because of their identity) and consequently not networked in the right way. This is something that the organisations didn’t have a good solution for. This tension between safety-led restrictions and open information sharing is an issue for the activism pipeline on the whole. Access to the civil society sector has to be restricted to an extent – but that creates a barrier to entry for new activists, also making it hard for them to understand the system before entering it safely.

The organisations and groups themselves were not well **networked with each other**. This was surprising as so much of activity and life in the region relies on personal connections. Be it from lack of capacity, the project funding being often divided by country, or limited opportunities (especially outside of the Russian language sphere), organisations often stressed they are not well linked, and don’t know what others are doing. Where the connections are facilitated, this is valued – Инсан-Лейлек[21] was highlighting their Kyrgyzstan Elef Khana network initiative, bringing together 50 smaller, less resourced NGOs in rural areas.

Many organisations working on media literacy across the region said that they feel the **need for more research**, so that they better understand their audiences and the field. There was a sense that they were operating within a deficit of information about what’s going on, weakening their advocacy for change.

How programmes are run

How do organisations and groups in the region deliver their programmes? I captured a number of important aspects of their work.

- Low pressure inclusion. A group in Kyrgyzstan runs a monthly ‘drink tea’ event – friendly, safe gatherings. There are different themes – for example psychology, or solidarity. The organisers use accessible, ‘non-alarming’ language so as not to alienate potential attendees with ‘activism’ language – for example ‘sisterhood’ may be used instead of ‘feminism’. The topic of feminism may be then combined with another, more accessible and practical theme. The meetings are advertised on Instagram.

[21] https://emgek.kg/insan

- Activating local initiatives. Organisations may have a mission to increase civic participation and engagement, but they deliver it through specific issues that are more tangible for local communities. The projects may be focused on supporting delivery of practical projects and local initiatives, which, as noted, can be a safer way to develop activism muscle within the society.

- Citizen science. This is a common model of micro volunteering in the West. It can be more fraught in Central Asia, as the lack of information that is needed for such activities is often due to a deliberate government action. One example found was in Azerbaijan, with an ecology project which chose to work with citizen monitors (rather than professional scientists) to capture information on illegal deforestation. Local people would send photos of the lands, and pay particular attention when the lands were changing ownership.

- Shifting social norms. This is a challenging activity, depending on the subject area. Some organisations choose aspects which are more allowable. Инсан-Лейлек, for example, works not only with migrants, but also their families, providing legal advice and running awareness-raising campaigns on risks such as human trafficking. They also run financial literacy programmes to pair with the income earned by the migrant. Through their connections, the organisation was hearing from the families that the migrants experience discrimination and violation of human rights. This was outside of their programme delivery, but they saw it as an important part of the system – so they secured resources to also run awareness programmes in 'host' countries (such as Russia). On top of that, they run an opinion-changing programme to raise awareness of who the migrants are in the origin and host countries – to address negative stereotypes.

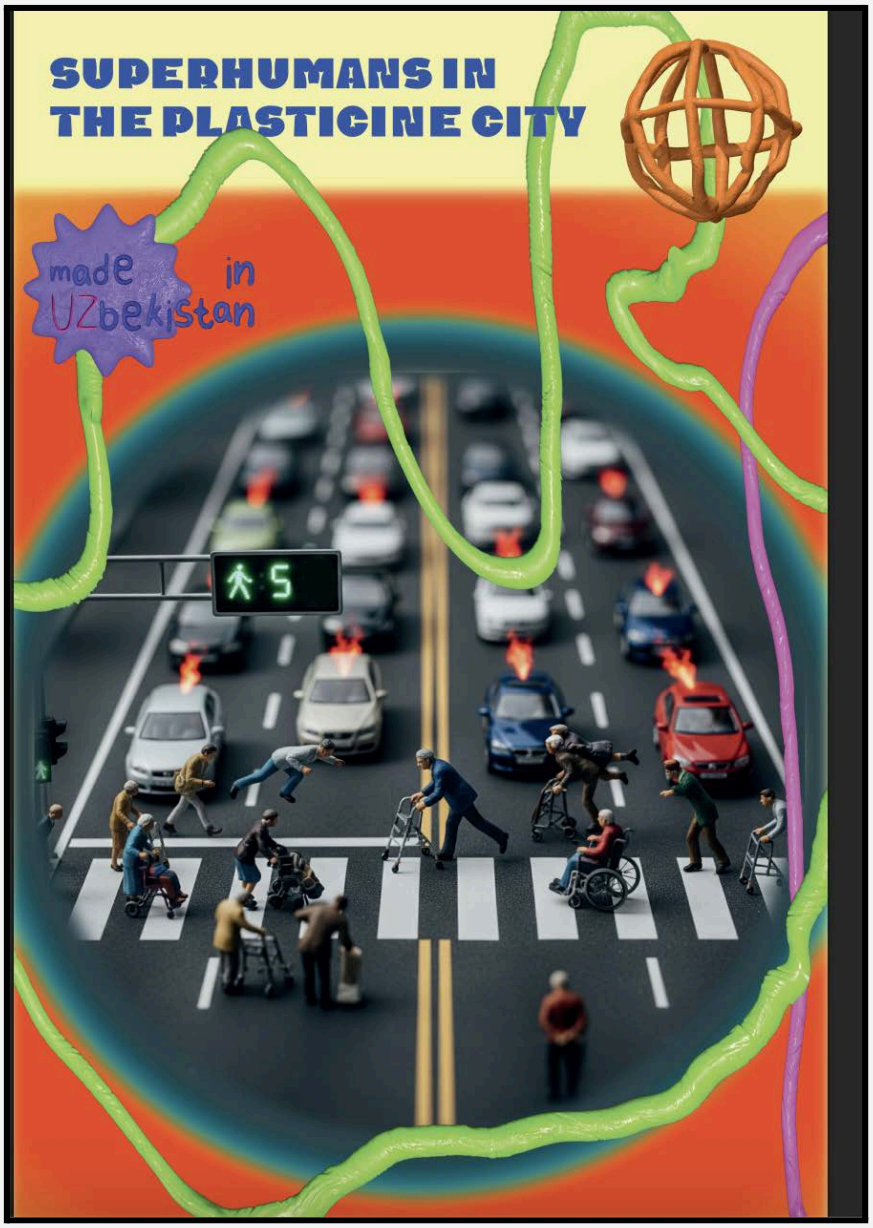
  Conversely, for groups working with marginalised people whose identities are not accepted by the society, it can be more productive to focus on providing support for the groups themselves, rather than to work on social change.

- Art and experiential programmes for raising awareness and activating. Many groups and organisers choose to deliver their work through the medium of art. This allows them to use more accessible language and subsequently can open audiences that wouldn't be reached otherwise. Artists are often drawn to working with local languages, and art accessible in Kazakh or Kyrgyz has a huge impact in these languages being embraced and alive. OzgeEpic in Kazakhstan for example is an art hub that does all of its activities and programming in Kazakh — the art space, theatre, gallery, museum, studio, bookshop, concert hall, workshops. They have branches in 4 cities — Almaty, Astana, Turkistan and Oral. OzgeEpic is a world play with Kazak word Өзгepic (change, Өзге means 'different') and English "epic" — together the hub's name is "different epic, an epic that creates change".

All of the creative, adaptable and novel ways of organising explored here warrant the attention of UK civil society groups.

"We want to expand our bubble."

Supportive use of technology, and safety online



> Zi Kakhramonova - Superhumans
>
> *This project explores the absurdity and irony of daily life in Tashkent (or any other city with similar infrastructure problems and public apathy) through the lens of a miniature, "clay" world. It satirizes societal passivity and the lack of civic activism, showing how instead of fighting for change, residents are forced to develop incredible, "superhuman" skills for adapting and surviving chronic urban inconveniences.*
>
> [I chose this poster to illustrate difficulties of navigating existing infrastructures]

With social ties being important in the region, a lot of the activism work is done in person. When investigating the role of technology in organising, several key aspects were highlighted.

Online technologies are used by NGOs and groups for meetings and **collaborative working**. Opportunities for collaboration with activists in exile open up thanks to online tools too – especially if links and experience was previously built in person. However, time and again people stressed that working online is a back-up and a less preferable option than meeting in person. In the end, they felt it's possible to achieve more in-person. There were also more security concerns related to working online. For example, organisers use encrypted messaging apps like Signal for communication, but on the whole don't share sensitive information there, assuming that anything can be leaked or intercepted.

Citizen science and monitoring of a situation on the ground to then feed into activism projects (for example in case of illegal deforestation) was one clear example of using technology. Training for tech monitoring tools was included in a 'forest school' training (in person).

With strong social ties, group chats on messengers such as Telegram are used for fast information transmission and **mobilisation**, for example in situations where rapid responses in crisis are needed (like during landslides in Osh). NGOs tap into these networks too, for example when doing outreach to Central Asian economic migrants in Russia.

Organisations use online platforms – their own, or global sites – for **developing civic engagement and civic participation skills.** Tools like online voting or polls do not necessarily pertain to sensitive topics – the idea is to get people used to engaging with civic processes in general. There is a 'fix my street' style site in Kyrgyzstan, and a government platform to discuss draft laws. Some organisations engage with global social change platforms, such as Change.org. Others are able to build their own sites for developing critical thinking and media literacy – such as Qlever.Asia,[22] which is used across the region. It aims to be interesting and useful, and includes games for young people. There is a high level of engagement – the Kazakhstan site quoted 50k active users, and is successful in involving young people from regions.

Considering **empowerment**, technology can be harnessed for self-expression, **capturing one's own voice**, especially in contexts where this may be challenging otherwise. Many local Wikipedia editors spoke of being able to capture not only their heritage, but also explore alternative narratives in a way that's not possible in, for example, their state education system. Wikipedia space, being global, gives people an opportunity to connect to something international too. NGOs spoke of using online spaces for promoting content aimed at changing stereotypes and shifting social stigma (for example about migrants). They create videos to post on Instagram and TikTok to promote positive stories about a given social group – often in collaboration with the communities themselves.

Community building and finding allies can be easier online, especially within isolated/marginalised causes and communities. People reported finding fellow like-minded

[22] https://qlever.asia/ru/region

activists on Facebook – while being very mindful that you should be careful online and not everything should be shared. There can simply be no interlocutors, or collaborators, for isolated and marginalised activists, unless they go online.

NGOs asked about their outreach strategy stressed that in-person engagements are key for building connections to causes and their work – and social media is just a small aspect used to mention their work in general terms. Facebook, Telegram, Instagram and TikTok are all used for broad communication about programmes – but NGOs stress it's not enough for community building or deep engagement. (However, Qela app[23] was referenced as a possible gamified network builder to be used in the future). There was also an issue of audiences on social media being scared to share and like content that's seen as too activist in nature – this limits the scale of engagement with the content shared online. General broadcast does have a purpose though, as participants at events I joined often spoke of finding out about initiatives or NGOs 'randomly', for example on their Instagram feed.

Social media is also the main remaining outlet of information sharing as an alternative to censored or state-controlled traditional channels. It offers opportunities to discover alternative narratives, which is critical if you don't have access to divergent thinking otherwise. Some journalists felt that these spaces have so far resisted slipping fully into activist echo chambers, and therefore are still performing an important awareness-raising function to the general public. NGOs hope to engage with social media for general awareness-raising campaigning around social issues. MediaNet in Kazakhstan[24] mentioned putting effort into creating engaging social media content about corruption, for example.

Still, it was felt by many that online activism is weaker in its impact and that, for example, feminist bloggers don't have big audiences online. This is on top of the push-back from ever popular lifestyle bloggers which popularise the narrative of activists as destroyers of traditions and local values.

While technology allows for more delivery possibilities, it was also highlighted as a source of risk and issues.

Poor content moderation is a major issue when working across languages. Internews Kyrgyzstan[25] was highlighting the issue of lack of Kyrgyz language support on Meta – already in 2023 moderation was done by AI. Information submitted to Meta about fake accounts does not seem to get actioned. All the while fake accounts on social media are getting smarter and their attacks (for example harassing comments, flagging publications, reporting content) harder to debunk and push back on. It is clear that the content moderation process can be weaponised against local NGOs, and that social media platforms are not well equipped to acknowledge and respond to challenges experienced by the civil society online.[26]

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[23] https://www.qela.app/
[24] https://medianet.ngo/en
[25] https://internews.org/data-journalism/data-journalism-projects/data-journalism-kyrgyzstan/
[26] AccessNOW has some recommendations in this field https://www.accessnow.org/publication/new-content-governance-in-crises-declaration/

My investigation aimed to capture how community groups use technology, particularly online tools, for organising, outreach, and keeping safe. Use of online tools increased simply in step with technological advancements, but also because many of the traditional methods of activism, such as demonstrations or protests, became untenable in the region. Unfortunately, with this shift to online, there was an associated increase in the use of methods of **digital oppression** of civil society online. Thus technology, while being an enabler of activism, is also an area of potential risk.

Digital resilience and skills of civil society organisations have become very important, but the digital capacity and expertise of groups varies a lot. **Technology literacy** I observed was uneven, with some activists very competent and aware, while some groups lack the skills needed for safe engagement online.[27] Some activists were mindful about every piece of information shared online, and assumed that anything can be leaked even with safety protocols in place and safe tools – which meant that much of the information wouldn't be shared online.

In some cases there was awareness that skills are needed, or that there are online opportunities that could be harnessed, but there was no capacity or resources to engage. One organisation highlighted that no NGO in Kazakhstan has trusted IT specialists who could do periodic checks on digital security. While they do conduct security audits of their IT equipment, they don't have access to expertise that would support implementation of any recommendations. Other NGOs do report changing their information management approach after a digital security training.

Questions of **security, privacy, and safety** loomed over the discussions about the positive use of technology. Many activists reported a feeling of being constantly monitored online, on social media and elsewhere – this was often stoked by comments from special forces during police interviews. These actions can be subtle and small taken in isolation, and only reveal their seriousness when considered together. Further, harassment online can extend beyond country borders, and becomes an issue of **translational online oppression** (more on this in the Exile section).[28]

In this context of low trust it's hard for activists to know how to support each other; there is the worry of becoming a target too. People harassed online (by people, or bots) are often left to process attacks on their own. This is hard as, really, digital safety of activist groups is a **collective question**. If one person is compromised, others are affected too. I note here that some digital safety resources do approach the question of online safety from a collective lens[29], which does take this aspect into consideration.

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[27] At the time of my research TikTok was banned in a number of countries in the region, which propelled many younger internet users to adopt VPN usage. It would be interesting to examine whether that trend also increased general awareness of online safety and use of tools for increased privacy online.

[28] Some of the safety resources highlighted as useful included https://www.digitaldefenders.org/publications/ https://digitalfirstaid.org/, https://tech-care.cc/, https://manual.digitaldefenders.org/, https://www.openbriefing.org/support/referral/

[29] Such as https://www.digitaldefenders.org/publications/

In general, while many international organisations offer **digital safety kits and skills training,** adoption is still challenging. Maintaining safety online is a dynamic situation and static, rigid training doesn't provide needed solutions. Skills building on the ground, with longer-term champions, and in local languages, is more promising. However, INGOs that work on digital safety (such as AccessNOW) do have a role in capturing the needs of activists on the ground (for example via a digital security helpline) and lobbying big tech for adoption of changes.

In comparison, while UK civil society can operate in a context of lesser digital threat, it's vital to develop good safety and privacy habits for a resilient future.

> *"Thanks to the internet I discovered 'feminism' – I would never know about it otherwise."*

Exile

Amir Kholmatov - Relocation. Series "The Power Within"

These visual stories are about people who don't shout—they germinate.
About those who change the environment around them not by force, but by presence, words, acceptance, and care.
About freedom that doesn't separate, but connects.
About bodies in which peace and usefulness dwell.
About roots that can be retained, even as we move forward.

The theme of how critical it is to connect and organise in-person kept on coming up in my interviews. However, as the local environment becomes increasingly repressive and unsafe for activists, the question of exile comes up as a possible mitigation.

Unfortunately, as activist diasporas grow, so do the methods of targeting them used by their governments of origin. Translational, digital oppression (especially surveillance) means that the threats to activists know no borders. Internet shutdowns are particularly pointed for people working in exile and online. Similarly, trans-border harassment works just as well to silence criticism and stop activism. So while exile is a protection tactic, it has some limited efficacy.

Still, for organisations working with exiled groups, and for activists who take this difficult choice, it was critical to express to me the value of their work, despite the painful context.

Maintaining the fabric of civil society is one of the critical roles of the exiled communities. If activists can operate from abroad, it may then take less time to rebuild civil society on the ground, to bring it back and (re)activate the networks when it's safe. Maintaining social tissue means it could be faster to rebuild civic networks when it becomes possible.

The big question is how much 'waiting' is practical and possible. How long can activists stall in waiting mode before they lose their audiences, and disengage themselves? How long can donors support 'waiting mode' activities before they need to see results and outputs? One activist described this situation as a zombie on life support. How long before the social tissue completely atrophies and there is nothing to rebuild? It's impossible to say – but it was certainly felt that supporting activists in exile can buy civil society some time and keep it alive for longer.

Some organisers spoke of being able to run in-country programmes from exile – made possible by relying on the contacts they made in-person before the relocation. However, there is certain unease around who needs to stay in-country and who should or could relocate into relative safety of exile. Sometimes the group's leadership could be located outside, with delivery people still on the ground. These are tricky questions decided by each group.

Another function of the civil society in exile is being **witnesses, and archivists,** of the situation on the ground, capturing data around, for example, human rights violations, and keeping the evidence safer outside of the country. This documenting matters even if it's not known who the future audiences may be.

Solidarity is also important. When there are no critical voices on the ground, it falls to the exile communities to speak out more sharply about the situation, to protest and express what changes are needed. It can be safer for them to do so, although with transnational oppression that's not a clearcut situation either.

Questioning the impact of exiled civil society

Any discussion of the positive role of the exiled civil society was underpinned by doubts of its efficacy. Can activists in exile have an impact in-country? Sometimes the issue is not just the lack of reach, but actual resentment and dismissal from the local communities, who may feel

the exiled colleagues are too separated from the situation on the ground to be at all effective. One organisation highlighted a worry that the audience for journalists in exile is shrinking. Their materials are of good quality and they react fast to relevant situations. But, as highlighted by Internews Kyrgyzstan, social media algorithms seem to be working against their content, and if people don't view the materials, the content is in turn promoted less, creating a vicious circle of decreasing audiences.

The exiled communities themselves become undermined too – infiltration by malicious actors and the associated lack of trust towards each other are major issues. People are hesitant to collaborate and share information online if they don't know each other. This makes the groups in exile weaker.

The role of funders

Activists highlighted a profound **challenge of convincing funders of the value of activism in exile**. It appeared that 'exile' is not being understood as a useful programmatic lens, making it hard to raise funds for it. It is indeed complex to map out and argue for the impact of work in exile. Many donors are interested to see outcomes 'on the ground', 'in-country', and they question the logic of doing anything away from that focus. The common orientation of funders for tangible, quick results is also a barrier to appreciating the point of supporting 'waiting mode' activities.

For funders who are committed to supporting exiled communities, it's important to be flexible and **fast** when a need for **relocation** does arise – this includes having an active visa programme,[30] and being able to quickly deploy physical and digital security measures. But support can't stop after addressing the immediate crisis – there is a strong need for **ongoing support** such as mental health assistance, digital security training, and community programmes. None of the activities are easy, and activists in exile need substantial support to navigate their living situation, with concrete resources, and psychological help.

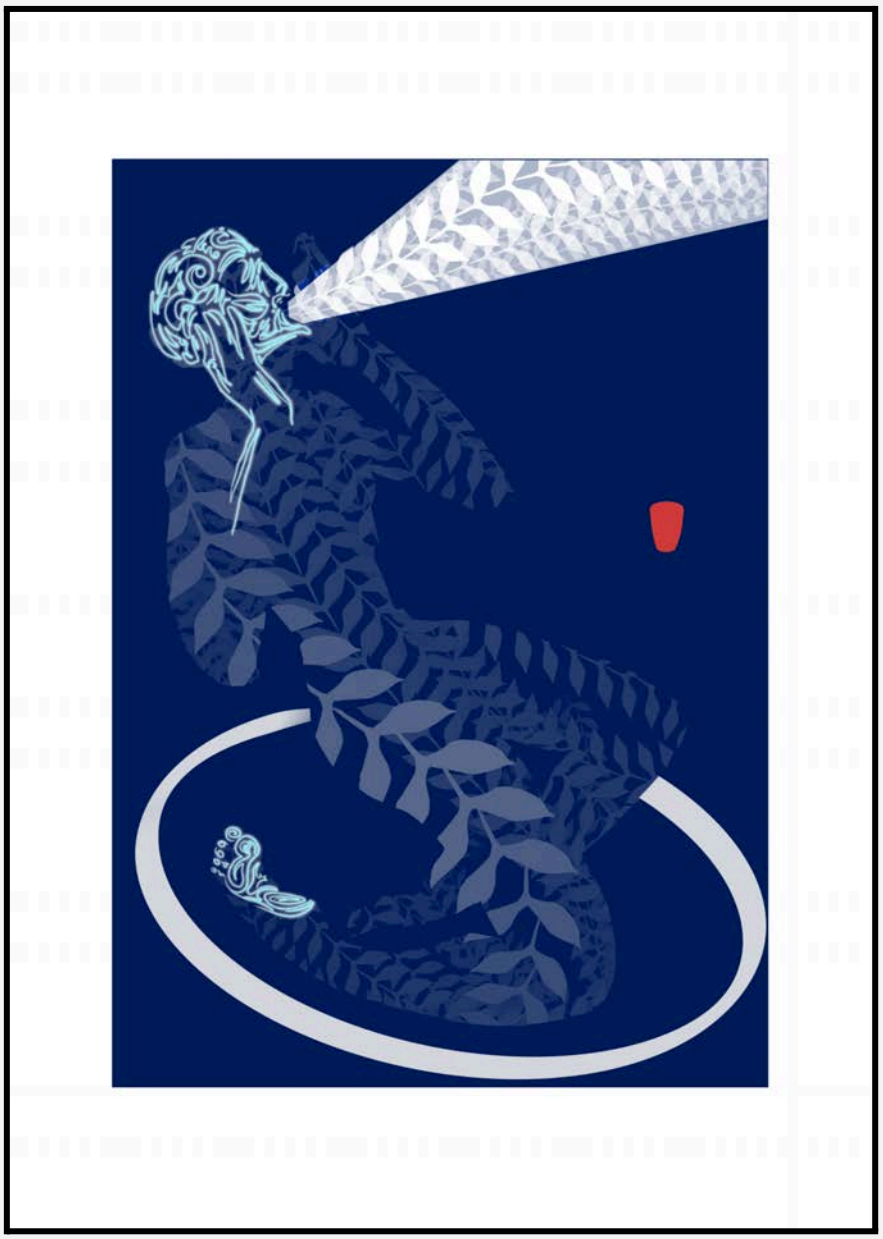
In the background there is an issue of the available support being **scattered and hard to navigate** for the activists – especially when they are under high pressure of a crisis situation, and if not well connected already (this can be especially the case for marginalised activists). Finding the right, tailored support in a short time can be very challenging and requires psychological resilience which may not be available to the person in crisis.

Finally it's worth noting that while going into exile is a vital protection solution, Open Briefing argued at the end of 2024 that international relocation should be the last resort, since "we risk undermining social movements and creating whole civil societies in exile by relying too heavily on international relocation."[31] Before it comes to that, INGOs should focus on providing security risk management and protection in-country. In any case, UK based funders and supporters of civil societies internationally should remain committed to supporting exiled communities, recognising their long-term value to civil society resilience.

"Support from exile is like giving air to civil society – it helps it survive longer."

[30] https://iphronline.org/articles/life-in-exile-a-comprehensive-investigation-of-the-challenges-facing-and-support-provided-to-human-rights-defenders-in-long-term-relocation/

[31] https://www.openbriefing.org/blog/rethink-international-relocation/



Amir Kholmatov - Freedom of speech. Series "The Power Within"

These visual stories are about people who don't shout—they germinate.
When a person speaks from the heart, words become seeds.
They don't argue—they germinate.
A word spoken with honesty and warmth becomes a light in which others can find themselves.
Such speech doesn't divide, but awakens.
It gives space to be, to grow, to think.
This is a freedom that doesn't demand, but liberates.

Burnout is endemic in activist circles in the region. People care about the causes they support and give it their all – in an environment which is fundamentally against them, and getting worse. It's difficult to be working on a cause that you think may be dead before you are. Oftentimes activists *cannot not* be activists – it's rooted in their identities and they cannot see a different way of being. Unfortunately this can lead to burnout.

I heard of many sources of burnout. The attitude of trying to just keep going, feeling responsible. Being idealistic and inexperienced, and faced with vicious smear campaigns and invigilation (plus not being prepared for it). Feeling the effects of long-term suppression, which means that fewer and fewer people want to risk being involved in activities that the activist is organising. There is the psychological stress or trauma, financial problems, stress of relocation, decreasing resources for the work, attacks against family members, harassment off and online. Having your reputation tarnished and being made to feel small. Chaos of constantly changing situations, and lack of time to adapt and process.

What's more, it is common in the region to assume personal responsibility for burnout, to blame the individual, rather than seeing it as a systemic issue fuelled by general injustices, constant sense of urgency (often propagated by the funders) and lack of resources and safety. It was hard to listen to activists talking about some of their past colleagues who needed to step away from the work because of burnout – they were not judged lightly (on the whole there was more solidarity and understanding within feminist movements). This plays into the hand of bad actors who work to undermine and break apart activist movements, supporting rumours about each other and sowing discord between people who in theory have the same goals.

On an organisational level, NGOs spoke of burnout from trying to work with international governmental funders, who lack flexibility, have very intense bureaucracy, and are so detached from the local context that they have requirements which cannot be met by the local organisations. (For instance, requesting more information than is safe to share, or requiring detailed audits which can be dangerous for the NGOs to carry out).

Further, it can take time to adapt to a new restricted reality, work through the emotions and decide what to do next – for example in the case of a new restrictive law or a dramatic cut in funding. Sometimes time is needed to observe how a new restrictive law would be implemented. In this context INGOs asking for theories of change, multi-year strategy documents, is challenging – often the organisations don't know what they would be doing the next day. Flexibility with regards to the context is called for.

Therapy and compassion

How to build resilience against burnout? Most activists stress the importance of access to high-quality mental health and psychosocial support for organisations and individual activists, journalists, and human rights defenders.

Culturally, sharing difficulties with others is not common in the region. People don't want to pass on their burdens to others or cause them discomfort. This does mean that people keep quiet and tend not to speak about their issues. Some NGO leaders who make use of therapy choose to courageously speak out about it, in order to change people's perceptions about it, and make it more acceptable for their teams to seek support too. Some progressive groups

allow staff to take extended burnout breaks when needed, and practice a culture of compassion and understanding.

Activists spoke of accessing therapy through INGO funded programmes, although there was a general feeling that these are restricted to emergency respite and don't offer enough to support someone through deep burnout or long-term exile.

Burnout awareness and training

Despite therapy not being generally accepted within the society in the region, there was a lot of awareness about burnout within activists and local NGOs. Some of it seems to have been introduced by international funders who would have had strongly encouraged grantees to include burnout programmes in delivery (Soros fund was given as an example).

It's common in organisations to have multi-day staff retreats focusing on rest, sharing issues and reactions to the political context, rather than strategic planning. This was especially prominent in Kyrgyzstan, where organisations were going through the shock of the foreign agent bill being introduced at the time of this research. Organisations try to equip themselves with holistic skills around emotional burnout, psychological resilience, and legal and digital security. They may line up legal and digital experts if needed in crisis. Thinking about burnout resilience in the context of a group, rather than an individual level, was particularly useful.

Some groups were receiving burnout prevention training and workshops from INGOs – activists stressed that this is often generic, not tailored, and therefore frustrating and not useful. Informed, locally grounded training, tailored through conversations with participants to understand their context, would be needed. Methods of hounding down activists are more complex now, and it was also felt that it's hard to keep up with that. (Programmes and resources that were highlighted as valuable are signposted in the Further Reading section.)

Individual measures

Beyond a group approach and training, activists mentioned a few individual coping mechanisms they tried. Some activists spoke of changing their perspective and thinking of their fight in the context of years, even generations, rather than something more immediate. This reframing would take some pressure off the immediacy that activism work can bring. Some activists were frank in referring to alcohol as their coping mechanism. Lastly, 'breathing spaces' were noted as critical in preventing or recovering from burnout.

Comparing conversations about burnout in Central Asia to those in the UK and Europe, it was striking how this topic is less talked about in the UK. The issue of burnout is certainly present, and poses a risk to the activism pipeline. As a long-term factor that can cause the activism movements to lose their key actors, burnout awareness and prevention needs more focus, funding, and attention.

"Where is that democracy?"

Adel Ismailkhanova - Stars

Activists, like stars, no matter how close or far, shine in the darkness, in this gloomy, endless, and cold sky, but they are always there and they see each other.
No matter how difficult and unbearable it can be for activists in various fields, I've come to the conclusion: if you're involved in activism, your soul needs it; you're part of something bigger and you're not alone. It's wonderful that in this endless, organized chaos, you choose humanity, love for nature and animals, seek justice, and help those who lack it. These collages are a small reminder, first and foremost for myself. But I'd also like activists who look at these collages to know that sunflowers always reach for the sun, and if you see these collages, then you are the sun.

In a restricted, conservative context, family life at home may not allow for a debate (people often self-censor and stay away from exploring whole subject areas), and public life is unsafe and full of red lines. ‘Third spaces’ are rather limited – life in a restricted civic space is stifled and oppressed. Where can the activists exchange thoughts freely, and breathe?

Value of breathing spaces

In a highly restricted context, certain thoughts are not even allowed to be had, and there are no spaces in which to develop ideas. As an activist you might have an emergent thought which needs **collaboration** and input from other people to build on – a trusting, safe space is needed to exchange with others and develop thoughts. Without the space for expressing thoughts, no interlocutors can be found. Without an accessible gathering space, no chance connections are possible.

Some NGOs that work on developing social dialogue bemoaned the lack of open social forums to discuss community issues as well. A space for exploration and developing understanding of others’ positions would be useful in creating more cohesion and decreasing polarisation.

A space to **express your identity and have it embraced** by others is absolutely critical, especially if you have been marginalised, rejected, and oppressed by the society at large. The creative spaces I visited which focused on inclusion felt like spaces to breathe for their communities. bULt in Kazakhstan described itself as a *community-driven experimental rave space, research and arts environment aiming to be safe for all forms of life*.[32] This is a common approach of breathing spaces – they stress universal acceptance for all (as long as participants accept the community principles of the space). At Salaam Cinema, the organisers spoke of putting in their own time and money into running the project, and in return getting a space embracing their identity – which felt priceless and indispensable, something they can’t exist without. Receiving **acceptance** of your identity, facilitating self-acceptance, can indeed be an outcome of participating in these breathing spaces. The spaces don’t have to be geared towards action – sometimes they are purely about allowing people to just be, in a context where their existence is otherwise attacked from all angles.

Organisers of ‘breathing spaces’ focus on making them **welcoming** and interesting – one NGO in Kazakhstan runs a Human Rights Hub thanks to a 4-year grant from the Netherlands. They organise talks for young people about human rights and how to get active. But the most important thing for them is to make their workshop space somewhere that people want to be.

Providing a **creative, collaborative Hub** is an indispensable community resource in a setting where ‘third spaces’ are lacking – the Youth of Osh organisers stressed that there are no such spaces available otherwise for young people in the area; there is nowhere for them to be together and pursue hobbies after school. Their new social hub, owned by them, is equipped with a library, a kit for making podcasts, and a crèche for little kids. Youth of Osh feels that only through practical experiences and by doing something together (and not through dry information-heavy workshops), can youth connect and find their space.

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[32] The venue is now closed; this link was still accessible as of 28 March 2026 https://www.instagram.com/bult____/

Going further, art and culture organisations often aim to provide a space for **creativity and freedom** for artists, so that they express ideas in a free and independent space. The Theatre 705 proudly described itself as a 'hundred square meters of freedom'. There was palpable pride in such spaces' character – artists described plain clothes officers very obviously sticking out, their identity clearly not matching the artistic atmosphere of the places they were visiting to monitor. Such places offer a space for the audiences to explore ideas too. After the shows at the Theatre 705 there is a free-flowing audience discussion where people can explore their reactions to the often socially oriented shows they just experienced.

Online breathing spaces
As elsewhere, physical presence was stressed as a key aspect of a nurturing breathing space. However, online spaces, if safe, can provide some of the function of an offline breathing space, by allowing connections to interlocutors that simply wouldn't be possible to find within the physical environment. There were a number of LGBTQ+ organisations in Kyrgyzstan mentioned who run private, password protected online spaces.[33]

Safe but not accessible?
There is a tricky mechanic to navigate in managing access to breathing spaces, online or offline. For them to be safe, they need to be free from invigilation and bad actors. But how to make a space known, if general outreach is not safe? How to embrace newcomers if they are not known to the group and there is no trust yet? Some organisations spoke of deciding to help their existing community instead of outreach, for example by working on shifting internalised hate and developing self-acceptance of people within their circle. Any outreach is limited and informal, done through friends and existing trusted connections.

A skills development camp I attended didn't invite any partner groups and limited journalist numbers. There was no information available about the camp before it took place, and only a limited summary afterwards. Social media use was not allowed during the camp to reduce the profile of the event and prevent possible tracking of participants.

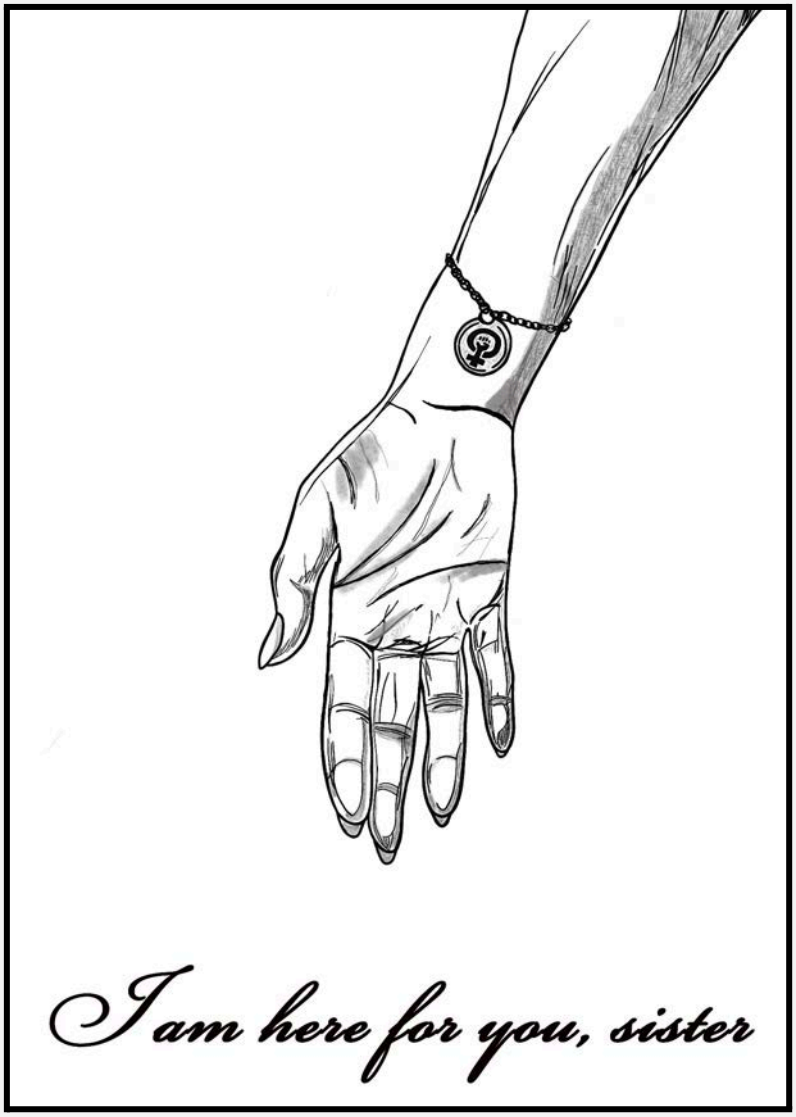
Precarity
Safe spaces are often monitored for any red lines they may be crossing in their projects. Another challenge is resources. Many of the physical spaces I came across exist through unusual arrangements, for example an informal donation of someone's private space. These spaces provide a community for people otherwise shunned, meaning that it's near impossible to secure needed resources locally. International funding and support are often the only options.

In the UK there is some recognition of the value of 'third spaces'[34] as ways of supporting a thriving community, addressing loneliness, etc. What's perhaps less recognised is the role of third spaces in building a civil society, in that they can function as respite and healing spaces for burnt out or marginalised activists. The impact of breathing spaces is staying alive.

> *"There is no space for me to have an interlocutor for my ideas."*

[33] https://novastan.org/en/economics/queer-life-under-pressure-in-kyrgyzstan/
[34] https://mccs-journalism.gold.ac.uk/wp/pacmag/nowhere-to-go-the-growing-disappearance-of-third-places/

INGOs and international donors



Ekaterina Sanamiants - “I’m here for you, sister”

A woman’s outstretched hand, open and inviting. On her wrist – a bracelet with a bold feminist symbol. The background is clear, putting full focus on the gesture. It’s a hand reaching out in solidarity, strength, and care.

This image is about connection and collective resilience. It speaks both to women supporting women – and to female activists standing beside those they fight for. The hand offers more than help: it offers trust, belief, and an unspoken promise of “I won’t let you go through this alone.” In a world where women often face isolation, violence, and erasure, this poster centers tenderness and power at once. It’s a quiet but radical reminder: solidarity saves.

During my research I was investigating a challenging funding context – and this was before the USAid funding retreat of 2025. Organisations painted a picture of a decimated funding field, with most big funders having left – this was due to a mix of changing priorities (e.g. refocusing on the war in Ukraine), or being pushed out by the shrinking civic space and impossible regulatory frameworks in the region. The lack of institutional support has been devastating for the field, with organisations feeling abandoned. This is particularly painful when it comes to topics that don't have local support, for example LGBTQ+. One organisation spoke of running such a programme supported by the Swiss Government, but this was stopped after a homophobic law was introduced in the country.

Power of the funder

Power dynamics of the funder–grantee relationship is a key aspect of how funded programmes are run. Many projects were introduced into the region by suggestions from the international funders (burnout workshops, leadership development, and debate clubs were highlighted often in my research). Funders who don't put effort into connecting with activism on the ground end up speaking to organisations that are already known to them, who are skilled in speaking in 'funder language'. Without a deeper connection to the field, it is hard to know as a funder if people are genuinely sharing challenges – a programme coordinator at a local NGO described a fairy tale of an INGO grant application, a circus of delivery, then science fiction of the evaluation report. What happens on the ground can be rather different than what gets presented to the funder, if the power deferential is big and if the trust hasn't been built.

On the progressive side, funders prioritise empowerment and subsidiarity – but this can call for difficult choices especially when it comes to risk assessment. Some funders were keen on leaving the activists to do their own risk assessment, and respected their choices about whether to go ahead with certain programmes or not. But this assumes risk assessment skills on the side of the activist, and calls for capacity building to ensure they are not making uninformed choices.

Shortcomings in current models of INGO support

Beyond the power deferential, there were common tensions that were highlighted in relationships either with international funders, or international NGOs providing services in Central Asia.

Activists highlighted that some international NGOs had **limited knowledge** about country contexts, sometimes treating Central Asia as a uniform region, which is far from reality. This can mean that training provided is too general or ill-suited. Sometimes the funder expects the grantee to put all the effort into explaining their working context, which is a big drain on resources. While the intention here may be empowerment (control of the narrative), it puts too much work on the local organisers. One group described a situation where an INGO came to ask them about what will happen with the activist space after the introduction of recent restrictive legislation. This was surprising to the group, as they expected to hear from the INGO about *their* insights and suggestions of help. As it stands the workshop felt like an information-finding project for the INGO.

More troublingly this limited knowledge can mean that donors aren't considering the challenges on the ground when constructing their grant programmes – for example not

thinking about digital issues (hacks, blocks, phishing, malware) or offline challenges (arrests, travel bans, limited employment opportunities) that organisations and activists face when running activities.

There was a general sense that the context of civic space is changing rapidly and that donors and INGOs are **not keeping pace** – for example reacting to what's happening in the moment rather than horizon scanning for governments' actions and planning steps accordingly. After the introduction of the foreign agent bill in Kyrgyzstan there was a sense that some international donors were unprepared, despite the situation having been predictable. The quick reactions required in that situation were generally not possible. Having nimble contingency plans for organisations on the ground would have helped.

This is particularly stark in situations where **exile** needs to be considered – it's expensive to gather legal assistance, relocate, and operate outside of your country. Emergency funds are needed to quickly react when needed, and grant funding often doesn't have the flexibility, a 'Plan B', built in to allow for that. Small, inexperienced organisations particularly struggle to chart a path without a supportive funder in such a situation.

In general, as is common in philanthropy elsewhere, there were many voices highlighting donor **rigidity**. This relates to heavy bureaucracy in the grant process, but even more so to how safety and risk assessment are approached. It was felt that funders get locked into doing things a certain way and stick with standard compliance rules which, while working well in open civil society spaces, may be impossible to meet in more restricted contexts. What is done for safety in one context can be risky in another. Particular examples include a prospective grantee being asked to provide information which is not safe to share or a funder being rigid in requiring an official registration, when for some organisations it hasn't been safe or possible to be registered for the past decade. While this is often designed to work against corruption, the orientation towards bureaucracy and risk assessment can actually lead to more risk for the grantees (while also being a source of stress and burnout).

Some funders do explore flexible and creative ways of supporting organisers on the ground. Yet it is not always preferable to have informal/unofficial grant payment arrangements. One organisation highlighted that informal funding was offered by an international donor, but this would have created bigger problems – for example at the audit point, which are now very stringent for the NGOs in the country.

Rigidity plays out with funder expectations for planning too – in Kyrgyzstan organisations struggled with the donor requirements for submitting strategies, theories of change and logframes, when they were adapting to shifting situations day by day. Emergency and feminist funders were found to be more flexible and understanding of this need for a tactical approach. It appeared that many bilateral, government founders are not present in spaces where funders talk to each other and discuss new, progressive, flexible approaches to funding – this detachment means their requirements are often not suitable or are irrelevant to the country context in which they are funding.

Civil society actors need to work against **harmful, negative narratives** every day. Unfortunately international donors sometimes contribute to these ideas – for example, by

leaning into the conclusion that in very restricted contexts (such as Azerbaijan) civil society simply doesn't exist, and that since nothing will ever change, it is not worth supporting.

There is also the challenge of how to fund initiatives without attracting too much attention to the organisers and without triggering the associated narrative backlash (e.g. the idea that international INGOs control the local country). There is also a pervasive belief in the society that civil society organisations are mere 'grant eaters' who do nothing and simply enjoy (waste) their funding. Narrative work around articulating the positive value of civil society is something that INGOs should be supporting, to counter some of these effects.

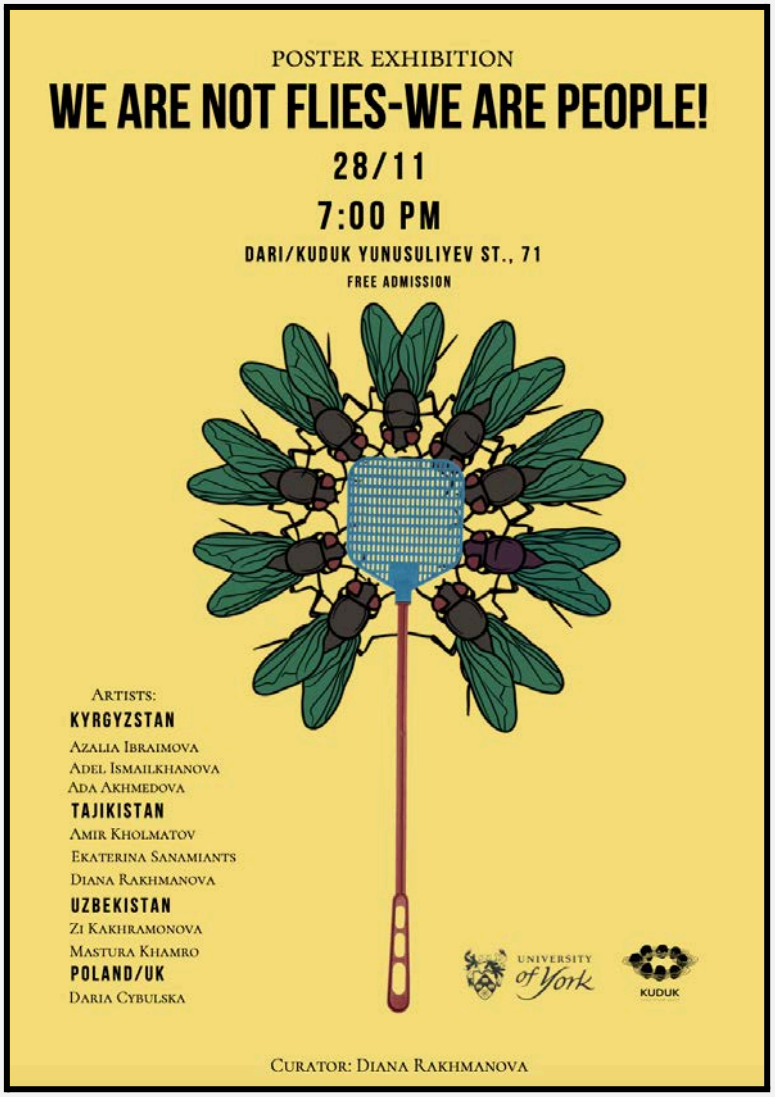
Considerations for models that do work

- Most programmes I witnessed function within multiple aspects of marginalisation and oppression. They work creatively across regions and think deeply about inclusion within their projects. This means that best funding opportunities should be intersectional and flexible, to match the style of delivery on the ground. Types of support need to be diverse and tailored.
- Flexibility also means being ready to provide emergency funding and visa support for relocation. Grants could also have built in flexible funds for future emergencies. Interviewees praised models where donors give flexible funding to organisations and ask them to keep a portion of it aside as a contingency fund for themselves in case they need to mobilise quickly.
- Another model which was highlighted was that of service contracts instead of grants, as it's not associated with the same restrictions.
- While sending money to closed civil society spaces is very challenging, models that can be followed do exist – organisations experienced in such fields and regions have experience that can be learnt from.
- Local initiatives that work on controversial topics struggle to get institutional support and they are persistently denied registration. This can also mean they cannot secure a physical space for their work. Support for such projects may include providing funding for non-registered grassroots, or not requiring an official status, or providing hosting support. One grassroots group described pitching a fiscal sponsorship model to a 'parent' organisation – a model they learnt about from a Swiss funder.
- Longer term, core funding is a very common request to funders. It has an additional importance in Central Asia because financially people's lives are not particularly stable. Reliable income would allow communities to dedicate themselves to their activism work.
- Funding opportunities need to be findable. A small, marginalised initiative, without English or Russian skills, struggles to even locate the funding opportunities that may be available.
- I noted a need for funding for research – as many organisations didn't feel they have a good understanding of their context and audiences, and felt that was needed for better programming.
- Another unaddressed need is network building and exchange, especially *across* countries in Central Asia. Risky environment (the need to hide activities) and mutual mistrust mean there is limited strategic coordination and lack of awareness of others' work and campaigns. Yet the interest to exchange and work together was very high amongst the organisations I spoke with. Funders should find safe ways to facilitate network building.

- Many leaders of NGOS I spoke with benefited from past leadership development programmes from INGOs – those programmes have mostly stopped now, unfortunately.

Apart from direct support, **international solidarity** and speaking about the value of the civil society field is an important role that could be held by INGOs. INGOs such as AccessNOW work to be the voice of the local civil society. Recognising that activists can't submit certain reports or issue open letters, they do it on their behalf. Some voices say that governments don't care for INGO criticism and as such it has no impact. Reputation is important though, and criticism, for example around failings on fighting corruption, may trigger a response and even action from the governments. Perhaps most importantly, international support matters for solidarity and emotional support for local activists. At the point of the 2024 marches in Georgia happening, around the "Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence", my interviewees in Central Asia felt incredible support from Georgia, feeling that it is standing behind them.

> *"International NGOs have some misconceptions about us. It would be good if they knew more about our context."*



Diana Rakhmanova, A0 of Freedom Exhibition poster

"We Are Not Flies—We Are People!"— was an exhibition about art activism, human value, and the gestures that shape our daily lives and spaces. Artists, activists, and concerned individuals are often perceived as annoying flies—disturbing, too loud. However, they are the ones who raise important questions and create space for change. The exhibition invites us to reflect not only on the value of artists and activists, but also on the importance of each of us participating. In our daily lives, we perform many actions that support those around us. We don't always call this activism or art, but at its core, it is participation.

The exhibition brings together works from the A0 of Freedom project, in which participants from Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and the UK explored themes of personal experience, memory, history, language, responsibility, and presence in their communities through meetings and collaborative discussions.

Narratives are patterns of stories, embedded deep in a particular collective culture. We use narratives to make sense of the world around us, the people and places, past and present, and they guide what sort of future it's possible to envision. Repeated and reinforced, they are powerful, since they shape our values, beliefs and views – about society, culture, politics. Even more so because often they can be subtle, invisible, and so unquestioned, woven into everyday life such that we are not even aware of them. Such unquestioned truths become normalised and are received as common sense, 'normal', used as a lens to interpret the world around us, the past, present moment, and possible futures. Narratives touch not just how we see the world, but also how we understand ourselves – they can shape the concept of our identity and purpose, forming an internalised story we tell about ourselves. Civil society in Central Asia is steeped in negative narratives about their work and the whole field. The whole context in which civil society operates is overtly and covertly stacked against it.

Granted, the work of civil society can be fundamentally critical, confronting, and inconvenient. It does bring attention to shortcomings of the state, to unresolved issues of marginalisation. Activists aren't working to be liked by the general public, rather, they often focus on building tension in the society in order to bring attention to overlooked issues. But here, I'm focusing on de-legitimising, insidious narratives from the state and the enemies of activists, aimed at silencing voices of the civil society. In Central Asia many of those narratives are additionally originating from or supported by messaging coming from Russia.

Restricting the boundaries of thoughts

Narratives can define the edges of our enquiries, our thoughts – and when these boundaries are defined by the government, this gives them a lot of power. Restrictive narratives limit imagination – so much is deemed unspeakable, unthinkable, and as a result people come to accept that change is not possible. Dreaming is another way of planning, and if the dreams are cut, we lose the ability to plan for an alternative future.

Restrictive narratives show up when journalists self-censor, when activists get burnt out by the incessant, harmful narratives they hear about their work, and when marginalised groups come to believe the negative opinions about themselves while lacking the language or space to voice this injustice.

Negative narratives about civil society

The most frequent and powerful narrative I heard is that **civil society is destroying traditions**. The governments across Central Asia use a narrative of traditional values skilfully, packaging many of their messages through this lens. There is focus on family traditions and religion, and on norms upon which the countries are built. The work of civil society is presented as destructive, a threat to national stability and to identity. There is a strong movement of lifestyle bloggers and community groups[35] supported to spread traditional values and push against social change activism of the civil society.

In this sense activists are framed as being anti-everything. This leads to the second narrative – **all that civil society does is complain, they are a destructive force** that doesn't bring anything useful. The perception of NGOs is very negative – 'they are against everything'

[35] For example https://kazsouzrod.kz/, popular in Kazakhstan.

(even against the society itself), all they do is criticise, and they disturb the government's work, which means that things can't get done. NGOs I spoke with in Kazakhstan felt that the image of their sector has recently worsened, and there is little public support for their activities. For example, any work on decolonisation is seen as creating a problem that wouldn't exist otherwise, pulling people away from simply living their lives.

NGOs are also labelled as destructive in that **they bring outside influence and foreign values into the region**, which is not guided by best intentions for the country. Being labelled as 'foreign representatives' has become quite stigmatising (and widely believed), seen as working for external actors and oriented towards destroying the country. Many young people in Central Asia dream of studying or working abroad – but one activist noted that the public opinions are shifting fast, and now somebody who studied abroad could be negatively labelled as foreign. This could be underpinned by a jealous sentiment, which the government is playing into.

There is also **jealousy** about (perceived) resources that local NGOs may have received. People talk about an NGO or an activist having a 'sponsor', or that the NGOs just take international grants and don't do anything with the funds.

On this note, **sowing disagreement between activist groups** is a successful tactic to drive a rift between the activists and the population. Accusations may be spread about certain activists, and other players within the civil society may believe them. This can be a source of serious isolation and burnout for activists who get separated from their communities (on top of pressures they receive from the society at large).

Disagreements can be stoked by **playing into existing tensions**. Within activist groups, I heard of generational tensions, for example between millennials and Generation X organisers, who may dismiss each other's expertise and background. There are fault lines along language (Russian vs local languages), location (capital and cities vs regions), access to resources (grants vs unfunded movements) and technical skills gaps. These often create bubbles, produce very different discourses, and generate difficulties for working together.

This can be 'capitalised on' by the government. Feminist movements in Kazakhstan described patterns of secret service having informal meetings with organisers and sowing seeds of disagreements in discussions between feminist movements – with the aim of weakening or breaking apart the movements, and showing the public that all activists do is argue amongst each other. In Georgia, where national identity is strongly pluralistic and inclusive – both Georgian and European – the government is trying to break up that link and introduce more tension and division.

There is also an underpinning narrative directed primarily at the civil society from the government – that **it's dangerous to be an activist.** Beyond the very real situation of surveillance, a general message is sent that anyone can be arrested, creating a chilling silencing effect.

In parallel there is also the work of government organised non-governmental organisations (GONGOS). They can enjoy an easier registration process, have access to funding, and are

active on social media. Their presence could be used to demonstrate that NGOs in the region function well, providing a counterargument that civil society is not really under attack. This undermines activists' messaging about shrinking civil society space.

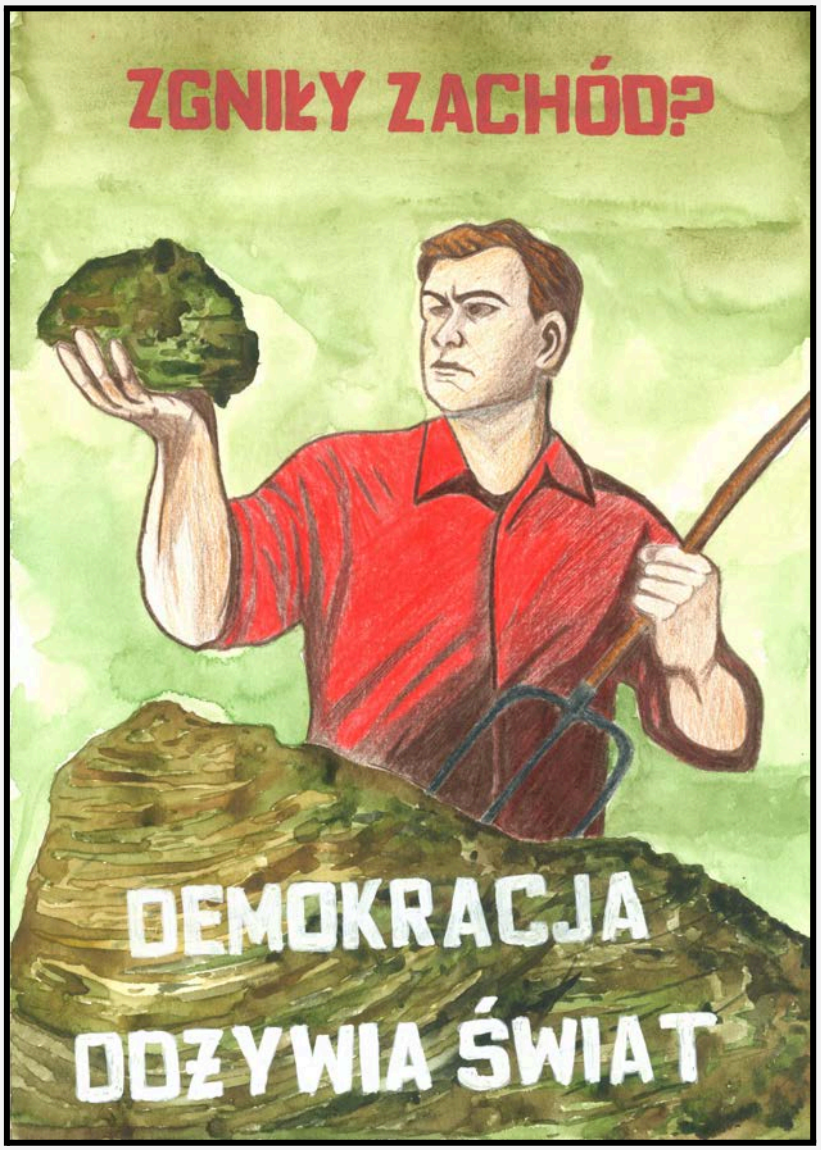
The outcome of these narratives is tangible – they do work. People respect the anti-civil society narrative, with serious consequences for activism. The society at large holds negative stereotypes of civil society, which underpins lack of popular support for activism. Human rights don't even show up as a concern in people's daily lives. This context results, for example, in broad support for the foreign agent bill, or having negative views of independent media sources such as Kloop in Kyrgyzstan, viewing them as manipulative 'foreign agents', or limited support for or even interest in jailed activists. Organisations I spoke with noted a trend of decreasing support and solidarity from the society.

Tactics for pushback

On the other hand, civil society can push back and craft, amplify and spread their narratives too, framing positive stories shaping our attitudes and beliefs. One key vehicle for activism narratives is art. In a closed context it can bring people together more safely, and appeal to a broader range of audiences. Art is public, and in Central Asia many feminists use it for campaigning. Public art can spread information and awareness of social issues faster. It can also be used to help build an identity where otherwise there isn't space for it.

> *"They say we are against everything."*

Positive and generative narratives



Daria Cybulska ‘Rotten West’. *Rotten West? Democracy nourishes the world.*

The Rotten West poster uses the visual language of Soviet time propaganda, together with the common slogan of the ‘rotten west’, to speak to the constructive and generative power of civil society. It subverts the symbolism of something ‘rotten’, reclaims it, and presents it as a fertile space for growth. Civic activity is pictured as a living process which can transform its environment for the better - it allows for freedom to draw from and re-mix other’s ideas. It’s organic and therefore responsive to the environment. The man on the poster appears strong and stern - but there is a softening of that image, since he is engaged in this act of generative composting/gardening.

Within activism there is space for being hard, aggressive, and working towards dismantling what we fight against. But across the field, and certainly in Central Asia, the task of finding positive narratives is an existential question, leaning into practising hope and using life-giving language. As outlined, activists are at the absolute receiving end of the vilifying narratives – from the society, governments, their families, even from each other. Anyone daring to speak for human rights is threatened. Suppressed, suffocated, and rejected by everyone and everything, activists' human right to speak out and even to exist is seen as an inconvenience at best.

Articulating the positive value of civil society and activism isn't about warm, 'nice to have' things. It's about finding space for soft radicality and affirmation, about not hardening up despite the impossible context activists operate in. Activists who find ways of using their voice are a proof of intergenerational, cross-regional, and cross-movement practices of resilience, defiance, and resistance against the regimes.

Civil society can push back and craft, amplify, and spread their narratives too, framing positive stories to shape people's attitudes and beliefs. One key vehicle for activism-oriented narratives is art. In a closed context it can bring people together more safely, and appeal to a broader range of audiences. Art can live out in the public, and in Central Asia many feminists use it for campaigning. Public art can spread information and awareness of social issues faster. It can also be used to help build an identity where otherwise there isn't space for it. I noted, for example, the activity of the anonymous street artist Inkuzart, active in Uzbekistan. Their stencil-style pieces placed in public spaces are often socially informed, speaking to corruption, for example. This is particularly significant as in Uzbekistan public spaces generally don't include graffiti or independent murals. My research showed how art, in its use of narratives, can facilitate divergent thinking, assert marginalised identities, facilitate speaking out, and craft hopeful visions of the future.

Shifting and expanding the boundaries of thinking

In a restrictive space, it becomes less and less possible to imagine alternatives, because, as noted in the 'oppositional mindset' section above, people are not exposed to 'difference'. There is silence around any alternatives that would question the status quo. People begin to think that change is not possible. Narratives are very powerful – they can define the edges of our enquiries, our thoughts – and when these boundaries are defined by the government, this gives them a lot of power. Restrictive narratives limit imagination – so much is deemed unspeakable or unthinkable, and as a result people come to accept that change is not possible. Dreaming is another way of planning, and if the dreams are cut, we lose the ability to plan for an alternative future. In this context, civil society can be a generative space for reminding everyone about what thoughts are even possible to be had. Activism can be about alternative viewpoints, introducing a variety of narratives, (re)discovering the unspeakable and unthinkable. In this way it can give inspiration for the sort of future that would make people grow. 'Feminnale'[36] has been a feminist contemporary art exhibition initiative in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. In the 2020 edition, pieces dealt with many subjects deeply familiar to the society in Kyrgyzstan – domestic violence, women's labour, and sexuality. Organisers of Feminnale felt that the quality of public discussion about women rights increased

[36] https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/fateful-feminnale-an-insiders-view-of-a-controversial-feminist-art-exhibition-in-kyrgyzstan/

significantly after their initiative, exemplifying how it created more space and offered more sophisticated language to people. It helped the audiences to see the issues from a different perspective. Art projects can influence the underpinning cultural norms and beliefs through narrative work, thereby contributing to shifting social norms and stereotypes around the most pressing issues in society.

This shifting of perspective doesn't have to be revolutionary – the value can be in creating some cognitive dissonance in the audience, to shift the thinking away from the binary and make it more elastic, thus creating space for a broader debate. Activism, be it through art or campaigns, can be subversive, playing with tension and difference, and taking risks in exemplifying a contrarian mindset. Deeper thinking lays the foundation for shifting perceptions – changing stereotypes or stigma of certain groups in society. It can also make space for systems thinking – analysing and communicating how people's issues are connected to broader problems. In Central Asia it's common to believe the issues that one is dealing with are one's own fault. Activists reported that it's hard to get people organised around human rights, because people believe that if their rights were broken, it was their own fault and their mistake. A shift in perspective is needed for the larger issues to start appearing relevant. Civil society can lay foundations for a different way of thinking first, and then follow it up with narratives and analysis that illustrate broader factors at play.

Building and asserting identity

For people who don't fit into the mainstream, whose identity is minoritised, repressed, or criminalised, there needs to be a space where they are recognised and embraced. Civil society curates and protects spaces to foster divergence and difference so that everyone has space to be themselves. A feminist activist was describing to me her journey of self-reflection and discovery in the context of Central Asia #metoo movement (ЯНеБоюсьСказать). Being one of the first women to speak out about the issues, she received little support locally and was misunderstood and rejected by friends – but going to a UN conference about women, and hearing about feminism, was the first step in accepting her position and identity. Without that different context and space it would not have been possible for her to process what happened and agree with herself.

Speaking out, using voice

'Silence is very popular' in the majority of spaces in Central Asia. Around issues of domestic violence, creating silencing shame is a major tool to control the victims. Building the skill to, and creating space for, speaking out, is therefore invaluable. The practice of expressing what matters to a person is critical to their self-value, especially if coming from long experience of being silenced. People involved in social campaigns and activities mentioned a transformative experience of having their voice heard for the first time – this was novel and self-empowering. Activists I interviewed reflected that civil society can capture and amplify people's voices and experiences – and so without it you can't actually hear what people really think. They focus especially on the marginalised and forgotten voices, and so, without civil society, these people would then remain completely unseen and unheard. Speaking out, and framing issues, can embolden civil society organisations and others around them. One NGO spoke of being initially somewhat shy with the language used to describe their work, but over a few years they became bolder and leaned into the human rights and feminism narratives. The language can be empowering, and that's why the recent trend to soften the language in order to avoid 'red lines' is very damaging.

Expressing justified anger (e.g. around injustices or marginalisation) is also something that civil society facilitates and enables, preventing it from being held inside. Break the Bat exhibition in Kyrgyzstan made space for expressing women's anger around experiencing domestic violence. From the position of power, civil society is always inconvenient. It always is a space to point out inequities, omissions, injustices. And as a result, it is always necessary. Civil society protects the people's muscle of resistance and opposition, so that we don't become fully agreeable to any injustices.

Constructive hope, generative possibilities

Despite the pervasive popular opinion, civil society is not all about criticism and destruction. It can be a hopeful place, showing alternatives and possibilities. When working on decolonisation, civil society can offer healing and create something new, rather than purely rejecting and deleting. For example, creatively embracing local language heritage that would have been previously silenced and shunned creates a positive, alternative identity both on an individual and community level.

One organiser in Azerbaijan spoke passionately about how participating in a community art project gave her hope for the future just by virtue of seeing that there are others around who also dream of a more open civic space. This last point links with the social power of civil society – building trust and human connections, bringing people from apathy to solidarity. Organisers of Salaam Cinema in Baku were describing a deep sense of belief in their community, knowing that people will support them, paying back what the organisers put in to build this loose collective together. The passion and links were created together. This was echoed in many other groups who prioritised fostering inclusive communities and bringing people in rather than breaking them apart.

Despite the positives, society at large in Central Asia finds human rights discourse alienating, irrelevant, too abstract, and boring. Certainly there are other pressing concerns in people's lives that come before civic engagement – security, socio-economic issues, family. It's not immediately obvious either how activism could shift the systemic underpinning of their issues, or it's too slow in doing this. It is necessary to learn how to communicate about the work of civil society in a way that's engaging and non-jargonistic – and indeed the skills needed to communicate the positive value of civil society can be learnt and developed. There are organisations who focus on building the narrative skills of NGOs for campaigns and social awareness projects. A skills-building camp for journalists I attended included a theatre module aimed at developing a different approach to communication. It's within art activism that I repeatedly found the most inspiring, subversive, and creative approaches to communicating social issues. Eco-activist Bermet Borubaeva described an outdoor yoga class protest performance which was an awareness-raising campaign about air pollution in Bishkek. Yoga includes a lot of mindful breathwork, which is healing and relaxing. The participants of the performance were breathing deeply, but were told to stop, because with the level of pollution it was actually dangerous for their health. The audience found this protest very engaging and interesting; in terms of a campaign tool it was also relatively safe as the police wouldn't stop a yoga class.

Resilient civil society is underpinned by positive public opinion of its work. This supportive public opinion needs to be sustained by positive narratives about the value of activism. In a

hostile context, such narratives won’t emerge by themselves – they have to be supported and amplified. As with any culture change, this can be a slow, deep process, meaning that positive framing and stories need to be sustained even in a supportive climate, to build up constructive and optimistic attitudes within the society. UK civil society needs to be aware of the power of narratives and skilled in spreading positive framings of their work.

> *“No matter how difficult and unbearable it can sometimes be for activists in various fields, if you're involved in activism, your soul needs it; you're part of something greater and you're not alone. It's wonderful that in this endless chaos, we choose humanity.”*

Recommendations and conclusion

Democratic recession often begins with suppression of civic space.[37] This is to weaken the 'warning system' which monitors and challenges the political power in a given context. It can happen in small steps, but gradually lead to a breakdown of civil society.

Recommendations to the UK Department for Culture, Media & Sport (Sport, Tourism, Civil Society and Youth area)

1. In scoping any initiatives or programmes, hold a broad view and definition of what counts as civil society. Include loosely organised, unregistered movements and fixed-period initiatives. When considering the type of activities that count as a civic activity, include 'non activist' initiatives (e.g. focused on food, environment, or social entrepreneurship) – with the right design such programmes still foster critical mindset and develop civic skills.
2. Support and fund critical thinking programmes, which build the initial funnel to the pipeline of activism. Fostering critical thinking skills is the indispensable step in building a thriving civil society.
3. Support Cabinet Office, and the Civil Society Covenant initiative specifically, in maintaining a broad definition of civil society actors and initiatives.
4. Commit to using positive narratives about the value of civil society, recognising that negative narratives erode public support for civic engagement.

Recommendations to funders of civil society

1. Set up to provide quick (emergency) and flexible support. Apart from funding for direct delivery, support should include funds for security protection, and legal and tech expertise fees. It should be possible to access a range of needs from one centralised hub that is easily findable even for activists outside of the known civil society 'bubble' – this needs outreach to spaces that haven't been considered before.
2. Grants could also have built-in flexible funds for future emergencies – part of the funding given could be designated as a future contingency fund for the organisations or groups funded.
3. Be flexible in vehicles of funding distribution – for example have a way of issuing service contracts instead of grants.
4. Support flexible delivery models. In some situations, service contracts instead of grants are associated with fewer restrictions. To support grassroots initiatives, it helps to work with a fiscal sponsorship model, and be ready to work with groups who have been denied official registration and lack official status.
5. Offer longer term, core funding with a non-burdensome application and reporting process to reduce strain on the applicants and lessen the chance of causing burnout in the field.
6. Funding to prevent or address burnout within civil society needs to be much more widespread. There is a lot of learning from how this is done in more restricted spaces.

[37] Wunsch, N.& Blanchard, P. (2022). Patterns of democratic backsliding in third-wave democracies: A sequence analysis perspective. Democratization, 30(2), 278-301. https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2022.2130260

Specific areas of activity that would have a big positive impact on the field are:

7. Funding for research to help organisations make sense of their context and audiences. In a sector under pressure, there is often no time or capacity to carry out this sensemaking.
8. Network building and exchange is under-resourced. In a pressurised context this can be due to mutual mistrust, leading to limited coordination, thereby weakening the field. Finding safe ways to facilitate network building is important.
9. Leadership development programmes have an impact that lasts for years after the intervention is delivered.
10. Funding positive narrative work (including art activism but also wider storytelling) means that the field is equipped with communication tools necessary for protecting activism itself.

Recommendations to civil society organisations

1. Building a pipeline of activists is an important role for existing civil society organisations. Developing a critical mindset can be achieved by programmes that aren't directly activist in nature, which can increase their appeal and reach. Tested models include debate clubs and projects harnessing art for expression of voice and communication of issues.
2. It's similarly important, especially for activist organisations, to broaden understanding of what participation and mobilisation can mean.
3. Designing projects intersectional in nature makes the organisation think deeply about inclusion and accessibility of its work.
4. Working within a democratic space doesn't mean that there is nothing to learn from more restrictive contexts. In fact, looking to areas such as Central Asia allows for exploring 'stress tested' models for resilience, which can either be useful for adaptation right now, or holding in the back pocket if the need arises in the future.
5. To increase the impact and reach of your work, become skilled in using narratives. Art can be used impactfully to establish new ways to counter harmful messaging about civil society.

Concluding thoughts – the power of art activism

Resilient civil society is underpinned by positive public opinion of its work. Without this positive view it is much easier to gradually suppress civil society. This supportive public opinion needs to be sustained by positive narratives about the value of activism.

In many shrinking civil society contexts, the work of the activists is broadly perceived as disruptive and negative, and this is to a large extent a result of communication by the governments in the region. Activism can be presented as destructive, 'against everything', a threat to national stability, and to identity. Across the field the task of finding positive narratives is an existential question, leaning into practising hope and life-giving language. Civil society can craft, amplify, and spread their narratives too, framing positive stories shaping people's attitudes and beliefs. One key vehicle for activism-oriented narratives is art. My research showed how art, in its use of narratives, can facilitate divergent thinking, assert marginalised identities, facilitate speaking out, and craft hopeful visions of the future.

Throughout 2025 I collaborated with Diana Rakhmanova from Kuduk Cultural Centre[38] on an art activism project we set up and co-led. The 'A0 of Freedom'[39] project was run under the programme called ‘We are for civil society’[40] of the Centre for Applied Human Rights and Civicus. It brought together a community of art activists from Central Asia to work on a public exhibition of posters, forming a defiant call for the critical value of activists as agents for civil society. Posters themselves were a deliberate choice for the project medium, being a popular tool for propaganda – but reclaimed for positive and inspiring messaging. The group reflected on using simple, engaging language to communicate clear desires about a different, more open and inclusive world. This was to help their communities to dream of a seemingly impossible joyful future, and inspire people’s hearts towards action, rather than despair.

Many of the A0 of Freedom posters draw on symbolism of light, stars, roots, seeds, flowers, and connections, while also referencing visual symbolism of Central Asia. These metaphors speak to the constructive and generative power of civil society.

The participants themselves spoke powerfully about their works. To conclude, I’d like to share their words again, as they were highlighted throughout this report.

Ekaterina Sanamiants said: *“The goal of my works is to show the positive side of activism. And to support activists by demonstrating how I see them – not the ‘trouble-makers’ but the hope and supporters of a better tomorrow. Activist efforts in one of my posters are marked in light and/or bright colors – a visual metaphor for enlightenment and moments of visibility, hope, and transformation in the midst of darkness. And even when there’s a lot of black – the light always shines brighter. This poster frames activism as an act of courage: holding up the light when it’s easier to look away. The lantern also reminds us that change begins with visibility – and even one light can scatter the dark.”*

Adel Ismailkhanova remarked on the visual symbolism of her poster: *“Through reflections on the interconnectedness of everything and everyone, I concluded that no matter how difficult and unbearable it can sometimes be for activists in various fields, if you're involved in activism, your soul needs it; you're part of something greater and you're not alone. It's wonderful that in this endless chaos, we choose humanity, love for nature and animals, [we] seek justice, and help those for whom there is no justice.”*

Ada Akhmedova *said: “The choice to depict grandmothers on my poster arises from a silence: the absence of stories and memories about female ancestors. In our culture, seven generations of grandfathers are remembered, but women are rarely given the same space. This work is my way of creating that space—for my grandmothers and all the women before me—thanks to whom I am here.”*

My own poster ‘Rotten West’ uses the visual language of Soviet-time propaganda, with the common slogan of the ‘rotten west’, and humorously subverts the symbolism of something ‘rotten’, reclaims it, and presents it as a fertile space for growth. Democracy is pictured as a

[38] https://kuduk.ca/
[39] https://artrightstruth.com/a0-of-freedom
[40] https://artrightstruth.com/we-are-for-civil-society

living process which can transform its environment for the better – it allows for freedom to draw from and re-mix others' ideas, creating a flexible and regenerative space.

Activists' work can be constructive and generative – not destructive; and appreciative of their rich traditions, rather than against all traditional values. The posters aim to be defiant but also beautiful; disruptive but also full of care and empathy – inviting the audiences to gently shift their perspectives about activism. This is the power of art activism.

Further reading

Civic space context for Central Asia region

- https://monitor.civicus.org/globalfindings/europeandcentralasia/
- https://monitor.civicus.org/globalfindings_2023/europeandcentralasia/
- https://monitor.civicus.org/country/kazakhstan/
- https://monitor.civicus.org/country/tajikistan/
- https://monitor.civicus.org/country/uzbekistan/
- https://monitor.civicus.org/country/kyrgyzstan/
- https://monitor.civicus.org/country/azerbaijan/

2022 report from AccessNOW on civil society responses in the region

- https://www.accessnow.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Digital-dictatorship-authoritarian-tactics-and-resistance-in-Eastern-Europe-and-Central-Asia-Access-Now.pdf

Briefings from International Partnership for Human Rights

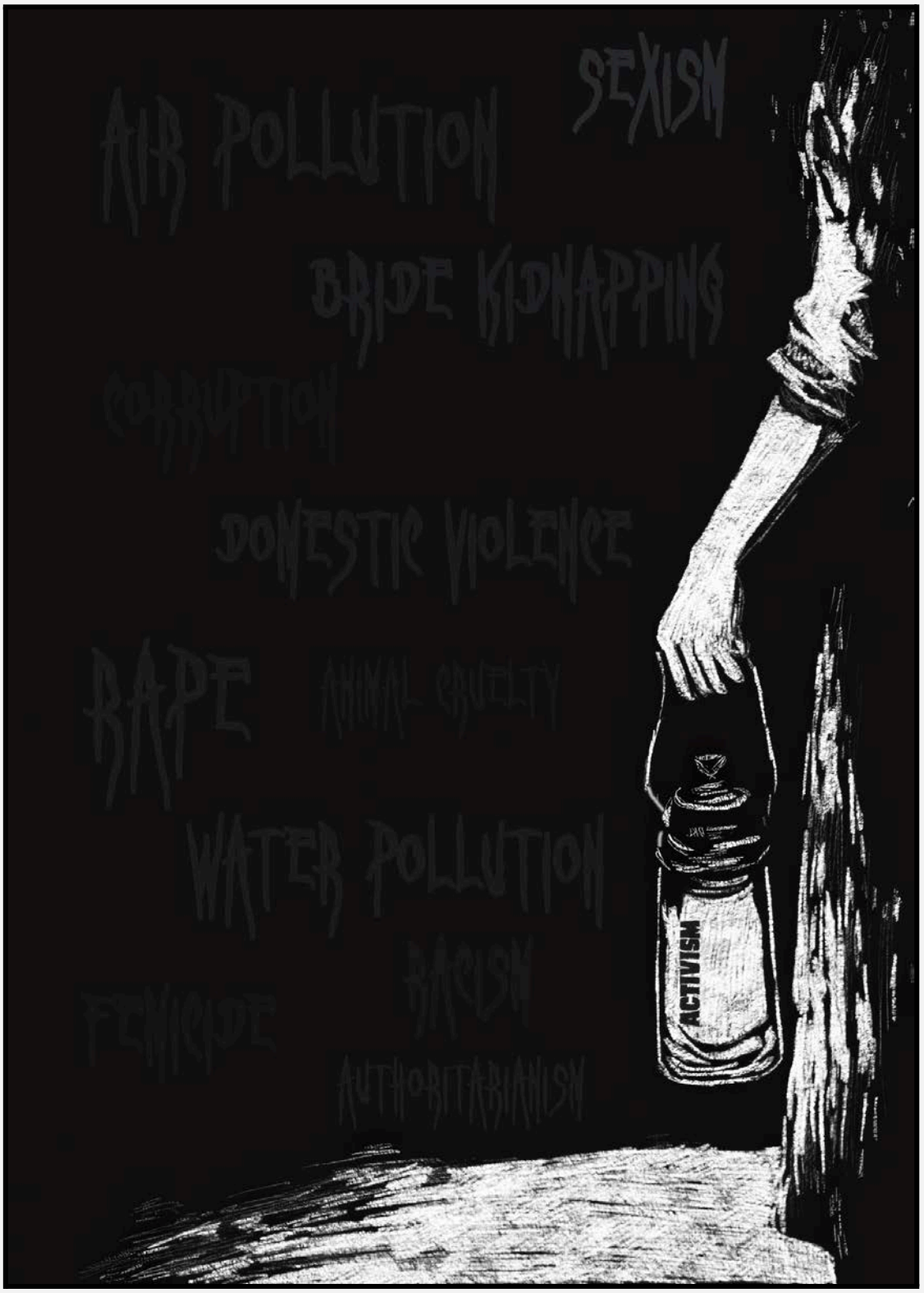
- https://iphronline.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/joint-central-asia-civic-space-briefing-for-2024-whdc.pdf
- https://iphronline.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/kyrgyzstan-upr-summary-of-key-civic-space-issues-and-recommendations.pdf

Resources on burnout

The Oxygen Consortium is a space where activists, practitioners, and founders can cooperate to pilot, test and learn around safety mechanisms across the civil society sector. Burnout Aid is an international activity aimed at preventing burnout among employees and volunteers in the NGO sector.

(on the next page):

> Ekaterina Sanamiants - Light
>
> *A human hand holds a lantern that glows gently, illuminating the immediate area around it. In the shadows outside the reach of the light, threatening words emerge – bride kidnappings, censorship, corruption, etc. The light doesn't erase them – but it exposes them.*
>
> *Activists are not just dreamers – they are torchbearers. This poster frames activism as an act of courage: holding up the light when it's easier to look away. The darkness represents the negative aspects of today's Central Asia – things that thrive when hidden. The lantern in the hand is a call to action, saying: "Look. This is real. This is not okay." It also reminds us that change begins with visibility – and even one light can scatter the dark.*


AIR POLLUTION
SEXISM
BRIDE KIDNAPPING
CORRUPTION
DOMESTIC VIOLENCE
RAPE
ANIMAL CRUELTY
WATER POLLUTION
RACISM
FEMICIDE
AUTHORITARIANISM
ACTIVISM